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THE
BACKWOODS BANDITTI:
OR,
THE HIDDEN HOME.

BY EDWARD WILLETT.

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THE BACKWOODS BANDIT.

CHAPTER I.

MOLLIE BRADLEY.

THE time was near the end of August, in the year 1851, and the scene was the rolling and broken table land, west of the Rocky Mountains, through which flow the various streams that form the sources of the Columbia River. It was not yet time for the sun to set, but the air was darkened and rendered dense by a peculiar misty, murky vapor, dry and pungent, that painfully affected the vision, and caused the hour to seem later than it really was.

Through the rich bottom-land, covered with tall trees and luxuriant grass, that bordered a narrow and deep stream, a party of four mounted men, accompanied by three led horses, was slowly traveling toward the west. The most prominent figure in the group was Ben March, an experienced trapper, who, with his traps, ax, camp-kettie, and the other appurtenances of a trapper's outfit, fastened to his person or dangling from his saddle, rode a small but very powerful pony, of the Skynse breed. Although the pony was a small animal, and apparently not a very valuable one, he was gaudily caparisoned, his head, mane and tail being tricked out with feathers of gay colors, and his bridle and saddle being fancifully embroidered with silk and embossed with beads. His rider was even more richly appareled, and might easily have been mistaken for an Indian brave. His black hair, long and carefully combed, hung down in thick masses upon his shoulders, over a well-fitting hunting-shirt of dressed deerskin, painted in gay colors and adorned with bright ribbons and fringes. His leggings, of the same material, were ornamented with little bells, black and red strings, and green fringe, and his fine Indian moccasins were nearly covered with bead-work. A blanket of brilliant blue hung from his shoulders, and was fastened

around his waist by a red sash. His weapons were a rifle and a long hunting-knife.

By his side rode Harvey Dyce, a young Missourian, who was wandering in the wilderness in search of novelty and adventure. He was well-formed and athletic, with bright eyes and a daring expression of countenance, and with a handsome though sunburned face. He was mounted on a fine American horse, and his dress was similar to that of his companion, except that it was destitute of ornament, and that his head was covered with a felt hat, instead of a fox-skin cap. After a tour through California, he had concluded to cross the plains on his return home, and had fallen in with Ben March, whom he had previously met in St. Louis, by whom he had been easily induced to make an excursion to the head-waters of the Lewis river.

The other man was evidently a Yankee, with sandy hair, gray eyes, and freckled face. He was attired in the habiliments of civilization, but they were sadly worn and tattered, and his "stovepipe" hat, once so shiny and shapely, was but the shadow of what it had been. He was named Eliphalet Stebbins, and he was from the stout old State of New Hampshire. Eliphalet had been journeying to California with a party of emigrants, who had quarreled with him and eventually robbed him and turned him out of the company. Being thus left to shift for himself, it is probable that he would have starved, or would have fallen a prey to the Indians, if he had not met Dyce and March, who kindly took care of him, and promised to see him safely "out of the wilderness."

The party was completed by Bighorn, a Delaware Indian generally called Johnny Jumper, a somber, sedate and silent red-skin, whose noble features and proud demeanor recalled the traditions of the great old Algonquin race. He had been engaged in trapping with Ben March, and had accompanied his friend on this expedition as a matter of choice.

"For my part, March," said Harvey Dyce, moving uneasily in his saddle, "I am getting tired of riding, and think we had better make up our minds to strike camp. Where can we find a better place than this? There is plenty of wood at hand, and plenty of grass, with no lack of water. The river is full

of fish, for I can see the salmon leaping over each other as they hurry up stream."

"All very well, Harvey; but thar's suthin' else to be thought of besides comfort," answered the trapper. "We can't drink water or eat fish with our throats cut, nor can we sleep on the softest grass with our skelps pulled off. We must be keerful to keep on the safe side of the red-skins."

"Why do you speak of red-skins? We have hardly seen one since we came out of the mountains."

"Better reason why we should meet 'em here. They'll be lookin' around in these parts for stray trappers, so's they can git beaver-skins without the trouble of trappin' for 'em. Thar's been sign seen to-day, my boy."

"What sign? You have said nothing about it. I haven't noticed any sign."

"Thar's plenty, of one kind and another. Ask our silent friend, yonder."

Harvey turned to Bighorn, who, gazing forward through the misty atmosphere, seemed wrapped up in his own thoughts.

"I say, Delaware, is this the truth that Ben March is telling me? He says that there was Indian sign seen to-day."

"Ben March never speaks with a crooked tongue to his friend, though he can tell a big lie to his enemy. Bighorn has seen Injun-sign this day. Sign of white men with 'em, too."

"If white men are with them, they must be friendly Indians, and we can have nothing to fear from them."

"Not so, my boy," replied the trapper. "It would be true enough if all white men were honest; but thar's some of 'em that train reg'lar in Injun company, and they are wuss devils than the bloody red-skins. I shouldn't wonder if we are on the trail of some such cusses now. Thar's another reason, too, why we should look out for red-skins. Do you see what a smoky air we have to-day?"

"I do see it, and feel it, too. I can hardly make out the trees on the other side of the river, and my skin is dry and parched, and my eyes smart until the tears come into them. It is for that very reason that I am tired of traveling, and want to camp by the water, to-night. What does it mean?"

"It seems to me like the smoke we have on the meountings

down East, when the woods are on fire," suggested Eliphalet.

"You've hit it, Yankee. That's jist what the matter is. They've been settin' fire to the grass on the perairas over thar to the west'ard, and the flames are workin' this way. It won't be long, I reckon, afore the Injuns and other critters will be coming across the Grand Rond in droves, and then we will have to take to the mountains. I'm doubtful whether we can go much further in this direction, Harvey, until the fire is burnt out."

"That is another reason why we should call a halt. If there is danger, and we may be obliged to turn back, we had better lay in a good supply of rest, so as to be ready for any thing that may happen."

"You are right about that, my boy, and the only question is, where we shall camp. We will go up in the open, where we can see as far as this confounded smoke will let us."

The party turned to the left, and passed out of the bottom land up to the high ground beyond the river, where they prepared to encamp on the open prairie. The spot selected was at the distance of a musket-shot from the timber, and Eliphalet marched off to gather wood for the supper's fire, while the others unpacked and picketed the animals.

Harvey, having taken care of his horse, announced his intention of going down to the river to get some fish, and sauntered toward the timber, not forgetting to take his rifle.

Cutting a stout rod, he selected a place where the bank was free from trees, and threw his line into the stream. The salmon were so plentiful that his hook was seized as soon as it touched the water, and he immediately drew out a fine fish, such as would have excited the envy of epicures in a city. In a short time he had caught as many as he and his companions could eat, and he put up his line, declaring that it was no sport to fish when the salmon jumped into his hands.

He thought he had better clean his fish where the water was convenient, and had taken out his knife for that purpose, when his attention was attracted by a sharp and peculiar hiss, and a voice exclaimed,

"Look out! Run to cover! Quick!"

It was a womans voice, clear and musical, startling the

young man more than any other sound that he could have heard in that region.

As he involuntarily looked up, he saw an Indian on the opposite side of the stream, with a bow in his hand, and the arrow drawn back, ready to shoot.

There was no time to seek cover, but Harvey threw himself flat on the ground, as quick as thought, and the arrow whizzed harmlessly over him. He instantly seized his rifle, and leveled it, but his antagonist had disappeared. He then gathered up his fish, stepped back behind a tree, and looked for the friend who had warned him of his danger.

He had hardly taken cover when she showed herself, from behind a tree, and he saw her plainly enough as he advanced to meet her. At first he thought her an Indian, for her dress differed but little from that of some of the red-skin girls, and her sunbrowned face and uncovered head also encouraged the supposition; but her regular Saxon features, and her large, blue eyes, on a closer view, told him that the denizens of the wilderness could claim no kinship with her.

Who could she be? Where had she come from? How did she happen to be there, "alone and lost," thousands of miles from civilization, in the natural home of wild animals and yet wilder men?

Such were the questions that Harvey asked himself as he looked in amazement upon this girl of nineteen; but she did not appear to be lost, or to appreciate the strangeness of her situation, for her step was as free, and her air was as bold, as if she was native to the place, and the ruler of it.

"You had a narrow escape, sir," she said, as she stepped forward to meet the young man.

"Narrow enough," answered Harvey, "and I am quite sure it would not have been an escape, unless you had given me timely warning. I owe it to you that I am alive and unwounded."

"That's nothing. We often run such chances, and take no notice of them."

"Are you often exposed to such risks? You must not think me inquisitive if I ask who you are, and where you have come from, for it is a surprising sight to see a—
woman in this place."

"I am Mollie Bradley, and am used to roughing it in this region, so you needn't trouble yourself about me."

"Are you not afraid of the Indians?"

"Sometimes I am, of course. They bothered me a good deal this evening, for I wanted to get home, and I found them in the path, whichever way I turned."

"Home! Where is your home?"

"I call it home, you know, where father and old Muggins are. I was watching that red fellow across the water, when I caught sight of you."

"Were you not afraid of me?"

"Not a bit. I saw you as you were coming down the river, and I noticed who you were with. I wouldn't be old Silas Bradley's daughter if I didn't know Ben March, and I know him to be mighty particular about those who travel in his company."

"It is too late now for you to go home, if you can call any place in this wilderness your home, and you had better stop at our camp to-night. We will make you as comfortable as we can, and will treat you as well as we know how to."

"I don't care about the darkness, but the Indians are too thick about here just now to suit me, and I thought I would go up to your camp and see the people. Let me help you carry the fish."

"I can carry them well enough, thank you! If you will put your bright eyes on the lookout for Indians, I think we will get along finely."

The young man took up his string of fish, shouldered his rifle, and wonderingly walked to the camp with the independent and fearless creature, who seemed so strange yet so natural an object in that wild region.

CHAPTER II.

A NARROW ESCAPE.

"How did you make out, Harvey, and who have you brought with you?" was the greeting of Ben March, as Dyce came into camp with his fish and Mollie Bradley.

"Some one you are acquainted with, I think. She can speak for herself, and this string of salmon will tell you how I have made out."

"Blow my eyes out, if it ain't purty Mollie Bradley!" exclaimed the trapper. "Glad to see you, gal! How do you happen to be on this side of the big rocks? Where is the old man?"

"Not far from here. He and Muggins are trapping in these parts, and we have a capital hiding-place. Do you know that there are Indians about?"

"The Delawar' and I 'lowed we saw sign to-day, and we are on the look out for 'em,"

"I have found them," said Dyce. "I would have had an arrow through me if I had not been put on my guard by our friend here."

"That's so," continued Mollie. "The red rascal had drawn a bead on this man, and would have tumbled him over, if he hadn't tumbled over of his own accord. The Indians are getting thick, and they will be swarming all around after a while. I suppose the fire has driven them in toward the mountains. But there is something worse than that, Mr. March—I have seen the sign of white men among them."

"Nothin' more'n we've seen, my gal. I was tellin' Mr. Dyce so a while ago."

"But you don't know who they are, Ben, and I think I do. What would you say if you heard that Big Sam and Markello were about here?"

"I would say that two of the meanest white men that ever lived had got together, and that honest folks had better look out for themselves. Do you think they are in these parts?"

"I *know* they are, for I have seen them. I was going home, to tell father about it, when I caught sight of you, and there were so many red-skins about that I concluded to make you a visit."

"Right welcome you are, gal. What do you mean by talkin' about goin' home? Homes are where houses are, 'cordin' to the talk I was brought up in. You ain't sayin' that the old man has made a settlement in these parts?"

"No, indeed. He is not a man to settle anywhere; but we have been here a long time, and we have a snug hiding-place, where we feel quite at home. Father and Muggins have been trapping thereabout during two seasons, but no red-skins have ever 'lighted on us yet."

"What do you s'pose Big Sam and the Kanuck are arter this a-way? Have they been driv' in by the fire, do you reckon?"

"They are after no good, as you well know. I think they have got a clue to father, and that they have come to look him up. He has a big lot of furs, not to speak of other matters, and nothing would please those two thieves better than to find his cache."

"I s'pose the old chap has consid'able valley stowed away somewhar, for no man ever touched a trap who is better up to beaver than Silas Bradley. I reckon Markelle hain't forgot about the killin' of his brother yet. Those Frenchers will sneak and crawl their life long for vengeance."

"I'm thinking, Ben March, that there will be pretty warm work if they find us out, for father can't get away with all his traps and skins, and they will take nothing from him without a hard fight for it."

"And I am thinking, Mollie Bradley, that we had better go to see the old man in his home, as you call it, and have a palaver with him. If he is in danger, we are the chaps who are willing and able to help him, for we are four stout men, and three of us, I'm sure, can hold our own against a smart sprinkle of red-skins."

"He will be glad to see you, though he wouldn't ask you to help him, because it might seem that he was afraid."

"We will go to him in the morning, then. What do you say to it, Harvey? I know that Johnny Jumper is willin'?"

All consented, and supper was immediately prepared, Mollie Bradley cooking the salmon as if it was a matter of course that she should do so. Harvey Dyce watched her as she was watching the fish over the fire, and he thought there was a peculiar sort of wild beauty about her, by the firelight, that was different from any thing he had ever seen before, and that was quite charming to him. Her complexion was clear, though bronzed by exposure; her features were very fine; her abundant hair would have been worth its weight in gold in the marts of fashion; and the expression of her large, blue eyes was deep and thoughtful, as well as resolute and daring. The young man wondered at finding such a being in the wilderness. Her presence was explained, it was true, by that of her father, and by the peculiar nature of his pursuits; but she spoke quite correctly, she was neither rude nor awkward, and her air of intelligence and confidence could not have been acquired from the bears and the buffaloes. He was glad of an opportunity to learn more of her, and was eager to accompany her to that secret retreat which she called her home.

After supper, when pipes were produced, he asked Ben March who and what were the two white men of whom the girl had spoken.

"One of 'em," answered the trapper, "is Sam Hirst, ginerally called Big Sam, 'cause he's nigh as big as a buffler and full as stout. He was driv' out of the company of decent white men, 'cause of his mean ways, and took up with the Injuns long ago. He is a wuss hand at robbin' and murderin' than any of the cussed red-skins, and it's a pity he hain't been rubbed out afore this. T'other chap, Baptiste Markelle, is a Canady Frencher, and I reckon that he and his folks, as far as I have heerd, have always been travelin' outside of the honest trail. He's about the keenest dog at a scent, and about the biggest rogue, this side of the Rockies, and that's sayin' consid'able. He had a brother, who was as much like him as one o' your eyes is like t'other; but old Sile Bradley caught him breakin' into one of his caches, up on the Fourcho de Glace, and rubbed him out."

"What sort of man is Bradley? Why does he keep his daughter with him, while he is engaged in such a dangerous business as that of trapping in this region?"

"Sile Bradley is an old man who has trapped since traps was fust made, I reckon, and who has stuck to it steady, all by himself. He mought have made a fortin if he'd j'ined some fur company, but he allers chose to go on his own hook, and would never take any chances. I reckon, though, that he has a pile of gold-pieces hid away somewhar fur his gal."

"Tell me about the girl. Why does he keep her here?"

"'Spect you think the gal is purty, Harvey, and you ain't the fust man who has been struck by that idee. One strong reason for his keepin' her with him is, 'cause she won't leave him, and she's got a will of her own, when she wants to use it. When Sile's wife died, at the settlements, she told the gal to stick to her father, and never leave him while he lived, and Mollie has done it manfully ever since. She's a smart gal, and a brave 'un, as has been proved afore this. She's tol'able knowin', as you see, and she has been taught a heap, I s'pose, by Muggins."

"Who is Muggins?"

"He's a sort of half-witted school-teachin' chap, from the States, who went crazy about a gal, and came out on the plains, whar he took up with old Sile. I don't know what his right handle is, but he was called Muggins when he fust came out, 'cause he was so blessed green, and the name has stuck to him. He helps the old man with his traps and about camp, and is mighty keerful of Mollie. I reckon he'd let his head be cut off for her, any time she should ask it. You had better put up your pipe now, Harvey, for it is your turn to watch to-night, and you will have to keep a good look-out."

The young man did as he was told, exchanged his pipe for his rifle, and left the smoldering fire. As he did so, he turned his head, and saw that Mollie Bradley had wrapped herself up in a blanket, and had laid down on the grass, where she was slumbering like one accustomed to the open-air life of the wilderness.

There was no moon, but the dense and smoky atmosphere, which seemed to grow more painful and irritating to the skin and the eyes, was unnaturally illuminated by the red light of the burning plains at the westward, that hung, in lurid,

threatening masses, far above the horizon. The scene was awfully grand and magnificent, and Harvey Dyce thought that such a sight, of itself, was enough to repay him for the toil and hardship of a journey into the wilderness. He almost fancied, as he gazed at the crimson clouds, that he could hear the roaring of the fiery torrent, and feel the hot breath of the flames, as their burning tongues licked his parched cheek.

He did not allow his admiration or his fancy to divert his thoughts from the caution and watchfulness that were necessary in his position, but kept his eyes and ears open as he glanced over the prairie that stretched down to the timbered bottom-land.

He thought he heard a noise, and he bent his head to listen, when he was startled by a shriek of terror, or pain, or both, followed by a savage yell of triumph, that proceeded, as he well knew, from the throat of an Indian.

The sounds came from the direction of the timber, and thither, with his trusty rifle in his hand, the young man ran at the top of his speed. Before he reached it, he saw, by the dim and misty light, an Indian in his war-paint under a tree. The savage was bending over the prostrate form of a white man, whom he held by the hair of his head, while another hand grasped a glittering knife, with which he seemed about to perform the bloody operation of scalping.

As quick as thought, Harvey leveled his rifle and fired. The ball crashed through the skull of the red-skin, and he fell without a murmur, by the side of his intended victim. As Dyce again ran toward them, he heard steps behind him, and found himself overtaken by Mollie Bradley, who was pale, panting, and anxious.

"It is Muggins," she exclaimed. "I knew his voice. The poor fellow has been looking for me, and they have killed him."

"He is not dead," said Harvey. "I think he is only stunned, for I can find no wound."

Ben March, aroused by the rifle-shot, came down to the timber, and the fallen white man, who soon recovered his breath and his voice, was assisted to the camp.

Harvey thought, as he looked at him closely, that he had

never seen a stranger creature. He was very tall and lank, loose-jointed and lean, with large hands and feet, and an angular head. His hair was black and long, his thin face was as yellow as if colored by the jaundice, and his dark eyes were very brilliant and piercing. He wore leggings and moccasins of dressed deerskin, a red flannel shirt, and a patched and threadbare black coat. His head was covered with the remnant of a straw hat.

He explained that he was looking for Miss Mary, as he chose to call Mollie Bradley, and had come within sight of the camp-fire, when he was seen and pursued by an Indian. In attempting to escape he had stumbled, and was pounced upon at once by the savage.

Ben March prescribed external and internal applications of brandy, after which treatment the ex-pedagogue coiled himself up near Mollie, and was soon asleep.

The Delaware, who had not failed to secure the reeking scalp of the slain savage, was placed on guard with Harvey, and the others slept peacefully until daylight, nothing more occurring to disturb their slumbers.

CHAPTER III.

BIRDS OF PREY.

To the eastward of the Grand Road, heading toward the Rocky Mountains, rode a party of fifty or sixty Indians, led by two white men. There were no lodge-poles in the party, no women or children, but the savages were tricked out in their fullest adornment of feathers and war-paint, indicating that they were on no peaceful expedition. The white men, also, who could hardly be distinguished, by their appearance, from the red-skins, carried no traps, or other articles that betokened peaceful employment, but were well armed with rifles, hatchets and knives. A few of the Indians had rifles and muskets, but bows and arrows were the weapons of the greater part of them. Behind the party, although at a great

distance, could be seen the red light and the clouds of smoke of a prairie conflagration, and before them were dimly visible the rugged and misty outlines of the great mountains.

One of the whites was a large and burly man, with thick and coarse hair, a heavy, grizzled beard, and a weather-beaten, brutal countenance. This was Sam Hirst, known as Big Sam, whose very name was a terror to peaceful trappers and travelers. His companion, Baptiste Markelle, was a smaller and better-looking man, neat and fanciful in his attire, almost to foppishness. His smiling countenance might have led a stranger to account him a good-humored fellow, of excellent intentions, but there was a snaky glitter in his little black eyes, which told that he was to be feared as an enemy, and not to be trusted as a friend. He had been a Canadian *voyageur* or *coureur des bois*, in the employ of the Hudson's Bay Company, but had long ago quitted all honest avocations, for the congenial society and predatory pursuits of Big Sam. They were fitting partners for their nefarious purposes, for both were unscrupulous and remorseless, and what the Canadian lacked in strength he made up by acuteness and adroitness, while what Hirst lacked in intelligence he made up by his superabundance of brute force. For years they had operated together, waylaying isolated trappers, or joining bands of Indians for the purpose of plundering emigrant parties and supply trains, until they had become hated and feared wherever they were known.

The white men rode in advance of the main body of Indians, accompanied by Ara-po-wah, the chief of the band.

"Whar you goin' now, Mr. Big Sam?" asked the big chief.

"We're goin' away from that fire behind us, as you kin see well enough. It's suthin to be doin' that much, I reckon, and we'd better keep our faces turned toward the mountings, unless we want to go to hell afore our time."

"Maybe so you git dar plenty quick."

"Speak fur yourself, old red-skin. Thar's another good reason why we should be p'intin' this a-way, and that reason is business. Business means beaver-skins, blankets, gold eagles and sech things, and p'raps skelps. Some more skelps would hang well in your lodge, Ara-po-wah, and I s'pose you wouldn't refuse the other things."

"Ugh! Dat good! Whar get 'um?"

"Baptiste, here, has been nosin' about arter Sile Bradley, a trapper who ketches heaps of beaver hereaway, and reckons he's got on the old feller's trail. Baptiste kin take us to his hole, ef it's in the natur' of man to find it, and we're the chaps to drag him out of thar and tote off his peltries. Beside his skins and things, old Sile has got his purty darter with him, and that's suthin more."

"Zat is somesing for *me*, Big Sam," said Markelle. "I 'ave nevaire forget 'ow ole Bradlee rub out my bruzzaire Pierre, on ze Fourche de Glace, and I yet pay him well for zat."

"We'll talk about the gal when we git her, Baptiste. No use tryin' to cook our fish afore we ketch 'em. Are you tol'-able sure that you know the whereabouts of the old chap?"

"I see his traps up on ze Leetle Peter Creek. I know his traps by his marks, and by ze way he set 'em. Zare was plenty beaver-sign on zat creek, and where you find ze bevaire, Sile Bradlee not far off. If we don't ketch him, we find some cache zat we sall open."

"We're on the right trail, you see, Ara-po-war, and you kin bet your skelp that we'll turn up suthin. P'raps the old trapper won't be the only good thing we will light on."

The party continued to journey toward the east, until night-fall, when they encamped for the night, and freely indulged in liquor that they had procured from some trading-post. In the morning, notwithstanding their debauch, they were again early on the trail, and before the day closed, were snugly concealed within a secluded glen near Little Peter Creek, where the Canadian expected to find the victim of whom he was in search.

Markelle went up the creek, to look for Silas Bradley and his traps, and Big Sam, with several of the Indians, started out in another direction, for the purpose of scouting and examining the country.

Hirst had not gone far before he came across a trail by which his curiosity was immediately excited. He examined it closely, and was soon convinced that it had been made by a small party of travelers or hunters. He knew that there were white men in the party, because some of the horses were

shod. He also noticed the footprints of two smaller and unshod animals, and concluded that their riders were Indians or trappers. They appeared to have been proceeding quite leisurely, and there were indications which enabled him to judge that they were looking around to select a proper location for their camp. The party could not be connected with old Bradley, as he was never known to hunt or trap in company with others.

He resolved to follow the trail, for the purpose of finding out who composed the party; but he had not traced it far when he perceived that he was watched, and that the watcher was a woman, who disappeared as soon as she was discovered.

"May I never taste meat ag'in," exclaimed Big Sam, with an oath, "if I don't believe that that gal is old Bradley's daughter! It's a long time since I sot eyes onto her; but I remember the looks of her head-piece mighty well. Markelle was right; the old man must be about here somewhar, and the gal is sneakin' around to see what I'm up to. I will foller her, and will either pick her up, or make her lead me to the Gray Beaver's nest. Ef I should git hold of her, the old cuss would be willin' to plank down right handsome to git her back; but I reckon it would pay better to take him and his plunder without any swappin' or tradin'."

The ruffian darted into the timber in pursuit; but he soon discovered, much to his surprise, that he might as well have undertaken to follow a will-o'-wisp, for she had vanished from his view, and her light steps had left no traces that were perceptible in the darkness. In his vain search for the forest maiden he lost the trail that he had been examining, and it was only after a long time, and the expenditure of much useless profanity, that he found it again.

Once more he started forward on the trail, tracing it as it wound through the timber, when he was startled by a shriek and a yell. He at once supposed that one of the Indians who had set out with him had come across the girl's path, and was murdering her. As he ran in the direction from which the sound came, he saw a savage with his knife in his hand, standing over the body of a white man. At the same instant he heard the report of a rifle, and the Indian fell.

Concealing himself, Hirst crawled toward the spot, and saw two white men, an Indian, and the girl of whom he had been in pursuit, collected around the fallen man, who was soon raised and led to a camp on the prairie, the smoke of which Hirst then perceived for the first time.

The Indian who was killed was the same who had shot at Harvey Dyce, in the early part of the evening. Having reached the bank of the stream, he had caught sight of a white man who was fishing on the other side, and had bent his bow to shoot him, after creeping up as near as possible, when the young man was warned of his danger by Mollie Bradley. Foiled in his attempt upon the life of the Missourian, he had crossed the river, and had occupied himself in reconnoitering the camp on the prairie. While thus engaged he had seen Muggins, who was looking for Mollie Bradley, and had pursued him. When his intended victim stumbled and fell, he rushed upon him for the purpose of taking his scalp, and was met by the bullet that ended his life.

Big Sam was unable to get nearer to the camp without danger of being observed, but he had satisfied himself that it contained white men, and he supposed that Silas Bradley was one of the party, as his daughter was among them. He resolved to return to his associates and inform them of his discovery, as he wished to consult with Markelle with regard to the propriety of attempting the capture of such a formidable force.

He found that the Frenchman and the Indian scouts had arrived before him, and that the former had already reported the result of his search. He had found Bradley's traps near the spot where he had previously seen them, and perceived that they had been lately visited and baited, but he had not been able to discover the trapper's camp, nor any indications that might lead him to it. He proposed to visit the traps again in the morning, when he hoped to fall in with their owner, or to find his trail.

"I've seen more'n that, Baptiste," said Big Sam. "I've found the camp, and have seen Silas Bradley's gal. If we do make a haul, I reckon it will be a big one, 'cause thar's more'n one white man in that crowd."

He then proceeded to relate what he had seen while he was

scouting, including the death of the Indian, which elicited a howl of grief and indignation from his savage auditory.

The Frenchman shook his head as if he doubted the conclusions that his companion had formed. He said that he thought it quite improbable that Bradley would be found in that camp, as he was never known to trap with others, or to be in the company of others, except when he was compelled to mingle with his fellow creatures for the purpose of selling his peltries or procuring supplies. The camp on the prairie, the Frenchman supposed, might be that of a party of traders or hunters, with whom the old trapper was acquainted, and with whom he had been dealing. As for the girl, he thought it quite likely that she had been frightened by the appearance of Hirst, and had sought protection from the strangers.

As the two leaders differed in opinion, it was agreed that the advice of both should be followed; that Markelle should again examine the traps, with the view of discovering a trail, and that the red banditti should make a visit, in force, to the camp that Big Sam had seen on the prairie.

Early the next morning, the Frenchman went to the creek to watch the traps, and returned, after a few hours, somewhat disheartened. He had not seen Bradley, and he had been unable to detect any signs that might lead to the discovery of his abode. There were footprints near the traps, and for some distance along the stream, but he was only able to trace them to a smaller creek, or rivulet, in which they were lost, and he was unable to find them at any other point.

The plan proposed by Hirst was then carried out. The band, mounted and armed, forded the stream, and came upon the prairie camp by a detour through the timber, but they were too late, for it was deserted.

After a brief consultation, they concluded to follow the party, and took up their trail that led down toward the river.

CHAPTER IV

THE HIDDEN HOME.

BEN MARCH aroused his companions at an early hour in the morning, as it was necessary that they should lose no time in preparing to abandon their camp.

"We can't sca'cely start any too soon," said he, "if we want to git ourselves and our critturs safe in Sile Bradley's bidin'-place. I reckon the old chap has got a mighty queer hole to crawl into, 'cordin' to the gal's story, and he wouldn't like to hev it found out by reason of us bein' seen around thar in the daytime. It's sartin that the red-skins hev found us out already, and if those infernal cusses, Markelle and Big Ham, are with 'em, we must keep our eyes open and take car' of our skelps. They will be on our trail afore long, ef they ain't watchin' us at this minute."

The horses were saddled and packed, and the party set out, without even stopping to prepare a hasty breakfast. It was a little before dawn when they started, according to Harvey Dyce's watch, but there were as yet no indications of sunrise, for the horizon was so obscured by clouds of smoke, that the first faint rays of the sun could not struggle through the dense and vapory air. The prairie conflagration appeared to be rapidly moving toward the east, for its lurid light rose higher and brighter, and the atmosphere seemed hotter and more difficult to breathe.

Mollie Bradley, refusing the offer of a horse, walked by the side of Muggins, whose cadaverous countenance was lighted up with joy, as he held her little hand, and tried to make his long legs keep pace with her dainty steps. Ben March and Harvey Dyce rode together in the advance, and the Delaware and Eliphalet Stebbins brought up the rear.

They went up the river for some distance, until Mollie led them away from the bottom-land, up through gullies and gulches, and they were fairly among the hills. Finally she found a wild and deep glen, difficult of access, but containing

abundant grass and water. It was shut in by lofty cliffs that were crowned with gnarled old trees, and was so completely hidden from view that its existence would not be suspected, even if any white or red hunter should happen to stray near it.

In this glen they found two horses grazing, and here they were advised to leave their own animals for the present; they did so, after unpacking them, and carefully concealing such portions of their baggage as could not be conveniently carried.

Then the girl led them back to the river again, and along its tortuous windings, until it spread out into a small lake, at the head of which it divided into two streams.

They had proceeded thus far almost in silence making no unnecessary use of their tongues, and keeping a good lookout for Indians, who might, as they supposed, be lurking near them, waiting for an opportunity to pounce upon them unawares. When they reached the lake, however, they could not refrain from expressing their admiration of its beauty. and even the silent and stolid Delaware gave vent to a guttural ejaculation of his delight.

The lake was nearly round, though its shores were irregular and indented with miniature capes and bays, and was about half a mile in diameter, studded with green islets. The shore on which the party stood, and that at the head of the lake, sloped down gently from the hills to the water's edge, which was fringed with young cottonwoods and graceful willows; but the other sides were bold and rocky, that which was opposite to our party being shut in by a range of tall cliffs, at the foot of which the water seemed dark, deep and silent.

The grass and the leaves of the trees were glistening with dew when our travelers reached the lake, and the island jewels on its placid bosom were radiant and glorious as they bathed in the light of the morning sun. Beyond, in the westward, the crimson clouds and the black masses of smoke above them told of the progress of the great conflagration which was devouring every thing before it, as it moved resistlessly toward the mountains.

"How beautiful!" exclaimed Harvey. "This place would be a paradise, if peace could dwell in it."

"What a splendid place to lay out a town, if any body could be found to buy the lots!" was the exclamation of Eliphabet. "Darned if I wouldn't raise a company to dew it, anyhaow, if I owned the laud."

"I don't know any thin' about your pairs o' dice or your town lots," said the hunter; "but I'm willin' to bet my head that ther's plenty of beaver about that piece of water, or thar' has been, afore they were all hunted away. Do you mean to say that your old man lives in that big pond, gal? What sort of a critter is he—a beaver, a fish, or a water sarpint? He must be suthin' of the kind, or he wouldn't be apt to choose such a wet camp as that."

"He doesn't answer to either of those names," laughingly answered Mollie; "but he has enough of the nature of all those animals to know how to choose a safe hiding place, and enough human nature to select a dry one, as you will admit, when I take you there."

"Very well said," mumbled Muggins, rubbing his hands; "very well said, Miss Mary. The repartee is appropriate, the antithesis is excellent, the language is well chosen, and the conclusion is logical. You deserve to be praised."

Without taking any notice of this encomium, the girl led her friends down to the edge of the lake, where she parted the underbush, and showed them a large canoe that had been completely concealed by the overhanging branches of the willows. It was hollowed out of the trunk of a cottonwood, and was very well fashioned and made, being "pitched within and without," like Noah's ark, with some kind of resinous gum. It was furnished with seats, and four light ashen paddles were lying within it. Mollie Bradley stepped into the boat, and beckoned her companions to follow her example.

"This here is a tol'able good kind of a canoe" said March, as he entered the craft. "It's better than the big bull-boat that I once went down the Missouri in. I reckon old Sile Bradley must have laid out a heap of time in makin' it."

"He was not so very long about it," answered Mollie. "His boat-building was a very good occupation for his spare hours, and he was assisted by our good friend, Mr. Lyle, who is generally called Muggins in these parts."

"The design of the bateau," remarked the pedagogue, "I

may rightfully claim as my conception, and I may also say that it was constructed with a view to symmetry as well as to service. The mechanical portion of the labor was jointly performed by Mr. Bradley and myself, and the result is before you."

"Never mind the partic'lars, old feller," said Ben; "ef it will carry us safe to the old beaver's lodge, whar'ever above water it may be, the canoe will suit us adzackly."

The boat was pushed off, Muggins plied a paddle at the bow, and the Delaware managed another at the stern, sending it through the smooth water quite swiftly, considering the amount of human freight that it contained.

It had gone but a short distance when a yell of rage and disappointment was heard, proceeding from the shore that our friends had just left. They looked back and saw a large body of Indians, headed by Big Sam and Markelle, ride down to the water's edge where they stopped, with angry gestures and exclamations. Our friends had been saved from a bloody battle and possible capture, by the Frenchman's visit to Bradley's traps, and by their early start in the morning.

As soon as they looked back they were greeted by a discharge of arrows, all of which fortunately fell short of their aim. The harmless attack was followed by the cracking of muskets and rifles, and several bullets spattered in the water around them, one burying itself in the soft wood of the canoe. Without stopping to return the fire, March and Harvey seized the two remaining paddles, and sent the boat swiftly ahead, soon placing it beyond the reach of danger.

"The bloody villains are after us," said Ben March, "and it's lucky that we got the start we did git, for we'd hev stood a darned poor chance at fightin' 'em on the even. Ef I knew whar' that place of yourn is, Mollie, I would try to double and twist, so that the rascals couldn't see the hole we run in at."

"I will take care of that," answered the girl. "I think I can hide our course, and their eyes won't be sharp enough to find us."

Under her directions the canoe was paddled around one of the islands behind which it was effectually concealed from the view of the ruffled pursuers. Keeping this island between

them and the point from which they had started, our friends sailed to another which was near the opposite shore. As Mollie thought that they would not yet be secure from observation in making a landing on the mainland, they cut a number of branches of trees, with which they completely covered the canoe, and set sail under them.

When the boat was again pushed out, it looked like a large tree in the water, or a floating collection of boughs, for which it might easily be mistaken at a little distance. All were couched down beneath the leafy covering except Muggins, who guided the canoe with a paddle at the bow, directing its course toward a point in the rocky shore where the cliffs were the lowest. Thus it drifted silently and slowly, slightly impelled by a light breeze that acted on the canopy of boughs, until its bow grated on the stones, and it lay there idly, like a waif that had been left by the water.

It had landed in front of a mass of bushes and tangled vines, that had grown up against the rocks, and Ben March, as he raised his head above the gunwale of the boat, and looked out, could see no way of ascending the almost perpendicular cliff.

The difficulty was soon solved by Muggins and Mollie, who got out of the boat without disarranging the branches that covered it, and disappeared within the green bushes at the base of the rocks. The others followed their example, and found, greatly to their surprise, that the bushes and vines served as a screen to a natural opening in the cliff. This opening, into which the waters of the lake extended for a short distance, was narrow and quite low, and it was rather difficult to enter it without getting wet, as Eliphalet Stebbins proved by slipping into the water and getting a thorough ducking; but it soon grew wider and higher, until it expanded into a large room or cavern in the cliff.

This room was fully thirty feet high and about twenty feet square, although its irregular shape could not properly be called a square. The floor was covered with fresh grass and skins, some rude benches and a sort of table composed the furniture, a couch of skins lay in one corner, and another corner was partitioned off by a curtain of blankets. Through the centre flowed a little stream of water, which came through

some invisible aperture above, fell down like a miniature cataract into a stony basin at one end, and found an outlet at the entrance of the cave. At the left side a fire was burning in a sort of fireplace, and although there was no visible means of escape for the smoke, its presence was hardly perceptible and not at all unpleasant. A number of beaver skins, stretched upon sticks, were hung about the rough walls, and one of those valuable animals, stripped of his fur, hung by a string in front of the fire, where he turned and roasted by his own weight, filling the room with a savory smell.

They found no one in the cavern, but Mollie Bradley welcomed her guests, and accounted for the absence of her father by saying that he had probably gone out to examine his traps, or to look for herself and Muggins. He would soon return, she thought, as the meat was nearly cooked, and Silas Bradley was not a man who was likely to miss his meals.

"While we are waiting," she continued, "I will be obliged to Ben March if he will look out and see whether the redskins on the other shore are watching us yet, for I am always in fear that this nest will be discovered."

The hunter did as she requested, and reported that a few Indians were still to be dimly seen loitering among the trees across the lake, but that there could be no danger of discovery, as they would not have suspected what the floating mass of boughs concealed, if they had noticed it.

"It would never do for the cusses to find out this nest, as you call it," said he, "and I don't wonder that you and the old man are partic'lar about it. I've seen a good many holes and hollers since I've been trappin' among these hills and mountains, but I must say that I never come across sich a snug and complete hidin'-place as this 'un. You did right gal, to make us sneak over here under cover, and I'm willin' to bet the spiles of a season's trappin' on you, fur bein' one of the smartest critturs outside of the settlements."

"You mustn't think that we are afraid," answered Mollie. "Father would be mad if he heard anything of that kind hinted. But you know how useful this place is to us. We have camped in it for a long time, and father would be very sorry to be obliged to give it up. I suppose it will now be safe to bring in the boat, but I won't need your help to do that."

The branches with which the canoe had been ornamented were removed, and were piled up at the edge of the water, after which that useful craft was brought within the bay at the mouth of the cave, and was hauled up in the covered entrance.

When this task was finished, the party were surprised by a noise in the roof of the cave, and a man made his appearance above them, as if he had dropped through the solid rock, climbed down a rough ladder by the side of the waterfall, and greeted them cordially.

CHAPTER V.

THE FLOTILLA.

It was truly fortunate for Ben March and his friends, that they had broken up their camp at such an early hour in the morning, for Big Sam and his banditti were, as has been seen, close upon their heels.

When they found that the camp was deserted, the rascally white men led their vagabond followers forth on their trail, and traced it up into the hills, where it became difficult to distinguish it, among the roads and on the stony soil. Men were sent out in all directions to recover the trail, as it was probable that it would soon be traced again in some piece of soft ground, where it might be taken up, and the glen in which the horses were concealed would doubtless have been discovered, if one of the Indians had not struck upon another trail, which he followed until he caught sight of the fugitives on the shore of the lake.

When this discovery was announced, the pack of savages was again put in motion, and they followed the new track as swiftly and as silently as possible, until it led them down to the beautiful lake, which they reached just in time to see the party that they were searching for sailing off beyond their reach. If they could have overtaken them before they embarked in the boat, they would have had a comparatively

easy prey, for March and his friends, although better armed, and skilled in the use of their weapons, would have been by no means a match for them, when placed on equal ground, and with their backs to the water.

The savages sent a harmless volley of arrows and bullets after the retreating canoe, and expressed their rage and disappointment by yells and gesticulations, as they saw it swiftly glide out of range.

They knew that the fugitives would seek a landing place before long, and determined to watch them, and to see where they went, so that they might continue the pursuit.

When the canoe went around the first island, and was no more visible, they concluded that it had stopped there, and commenced to consider by what means they might reach the island.

"Drat the sneakin' cusses!" exclaimed Big Sam. "They've took to the water, like a lot of skeery beavers, thinkin' we can't foller 'em, 'cause we hain't got any canoes. They'll find out thar mistake afore long, as sure as my name is Sam Hirst. They hev landed on the ileyand yonder, and I 'spect that must be the place whar old Sile Bradley hides. Ef it is, we've got 'em caged, for they won't find it an easy matter to git away from thar without our knowin' it."

"I guess zat is not ze place where old Bradlee hides himself," replied the Frenchman. "He would nevaire go across ze wataire so far, and up into ze hills to his traps, for zat would make too much chance to be seen. Ze Gray Bevaire is very secret, and knows well how to keep himself out of sight."

"Ef that ain't the place, they must hev dived down to the bottom of the lake, fur you know well enough that they went straight to the ileyand, and stopped thar."

"I'haps zey stop till we go 'way, and zen zey will go on to some ozzar place."

"That mought be so, but we don't mean to go away, until we find out suthin' more about 'em. We had better send some of the Injuns up and down the lake, so that we can keep a good watch on that ileyand. They mustn't git away from thar, without our seein' whar they go to."

Several Indians were accordingly sent off, who were direct-

ed to take their stations at different points on the shore of the lake, and to keep a close watch on the island. The precaution was useless, as the fugitives had already left that point, and were securely sheltered behind another and a smaller island.

"I tell you what it is, Baptiste," said Big Sam, when the two white men had resumed their scrutiny of the suspected position, "thar's two chaps in that party that I'm keen to git hold of. Ben March, a high-steppin' chap, who used to work for the Rocky Mountain company, is among 'em, and so is the sneakin' Delawar' that they call Johnny Jumper. I've got a heavy grudge ag'inst Ben March, and I don't own to any likin' fur t'other chap."

"Zat Johnny Jumpaire is a dam rascaile Injin," exclaimed Markelle. "It was by him zat I was found out when I took some bales of fur from ze company up near ze Fort Wallawalla, and I will yet kill him fur zat."

"I reckon you'll hev a good chance to git even with him, Frenchy, and with old Sile Bradley, too, fur we'll keep 'em cooped up on that ileyand till they are starved out, or till we contrive some way to git thar skelps and thar plunder."

"I guess zey are not on ze island at all, Sam Hirst, or zey will not stay on it. What is zat in ze wataire, floating to ze ozzer shore?"

"What do you mean? I don't take notice of anythin' partic'lar."

"Far away in ze wataire, beyond anozzer island. P'raps zey mean to put some trick upon us."

"They've got to be smart to do it. I see what you mean. Why, Frenchy, that's nothin' but a big tree, driftin' about in the lake."

"It is a mighty big tree, and ze branches look queer. How do you s'pose it came in ze wataire at zat place?"

"It has been blown down, of course, from one of those hills yonder. Nothing is more nateral than that, but you are the cussedest suspiciousest chap I ever heerd talk. Look a-here, Ara-po-war; Baptiste has got some queer notion about that tree that is floatin' in the water over thar. He sticks to it that the folks we are arter hain't stopped on the ileyand yonder, though nobody has seen 'em leave it, and

I reckon he thinks that they hev turned into trees, and gone driftin' about over the lake."

"Maybe so they put branches on canoe, like Injun do sometimes," answered the chief. "Tree looks queer, as Baptiste says, and what should the Gray Beaver stay on island for? Why don't tree go down stream, like the water? Water don't run toward the shore, but tree move that way right on."

"Your eyes must be better'n mine, ef you can obsarve those p'int's. Fur my part, I should think the wind might hev suthin' to do with sendin' the tree toward shore, though thar' ain't much of it, to be sure."

They continued to watch the floating tree, until it stranded on the opposite shore, where it remained motionless.

"Thar', now!" triumphantly exclaimed Hirst. "Didn't I tell you so? What do you think of that, you two? The tree has landed on the shore, just as any tree would do, when it got tired of floatin', and thar' it sticks. Does it look any thin' like a canoe? Do you see any folks gittin' out of it, or movin' about it?"

"I guess I see ze branches shake a little," persisted the Canadian.

"I guess you see with your tongue, more'n you see with your eyes. When you git a notion into your head, you're so all-fired obstinate that it couldn't be chopped out with an ax. S'pose thar' were any people thar; I'd like to know what in thunder they would land at that place fur. Would you 'spect them to climb up that steep rock, or to bore a hole in it? I rather reckon not."

The others were compelled reluctantly to subscribe to this opinion, and Hirst was asked what course he thought it advisable to pursue.

"Thar's only one thing to do," triumphantly replied that worthy, "and you could see it ef your eyes and head wasn't stuffed full of your own conceited notions. When it comes to conceit, I do raaly believe that thar's nothin' kin take down a Frencher, onless it's an Injun. Here's Baptiste, swearin', jist a minute ago, that a floatin' tree was the party we're huntin' fur; and you, Ara-po-war, though you was born in the kentry, stickin' up to him, and ready to back him in his onreasonable idees. You wouldn't either of you listen to me,

a man who has trapped in these parts goin' on thirty year, but you jest kep—"

"Come, come, *enfant de garce*," interrupted the Canadian, "your tongue runs away wiz you. Tell us vat ve sall do."

"That's jest what I'm goin' to do, ef you'll stop your eternal jaw and listen. You saw that I was right, as I allers am, and you had to own up to it, as you mought better hev done afore, and now you ask me what is to be done, and I'm goin' to tell you. Bein' as it's sartin that the cusses are on the ileyand yonder, we must make a raft, and float out to 'em, and take 'em."

"Why not say that afore?" grumbled the Indian. "Mighty easy to say that little. I say, make two rafts, and go all 'round 'em."

"Jest what I was going to tell you, but you wouldn't listen. In course we must hev two rafts, so's we kin divide, and take 'em on both sides at once. I'll take one of the rafts, with part of the Injuns, and you, Markelle, must take the other. Let those half-dozen chaps stay along the shore, and watch the ileyand, while we put the floats together. Set your men to work, Ara-po-war, fur we must be over thar' afore sunset."

Orders were given, in accordance with the directions of Big Sam, and the red men were soon busily employed, with axes, hatchets and knives, in felling and trimming trees, and cutting withes to fasten them together. In the course of a couple of hours they had completed two rafts, large and stout enough to convey the whole party, if it should be considered advisable to embark them all. On one side of each of the floats two heavy logs were placed, one above the other, and were well secured in their positons, forming a breastwork behind which the assailants could lie in comparative safety. Some sweeps were made of long poles with the brush ends left on them, and Big Sam, who was the designer of the fleet, pronounced the work satisfactorily done.

"Couldn't be anythin' better," chuckled the big ruffian. "That thar is what I call a fort on a raft. It will give us a powerful advantage over those critters on the ileyand—not that we need it, fur thar's enough of us to chaw 'em all up, but I ain't above takin' an advantage when I kin git it. The Gray Beaver, as the injins call old Sile Bradley, will find out

that some folks kin move on the water without dugouts. Thar's nobody been seen about the ileyand yet, and thar's no doubt the old chap is layin' a trap fur us, fur he can't be sech a fool as to think we don't know whar' he's hidin'. You see now, Baptiste, and you, Ara-po-war, that I was right, as I allurs am, and thar's no use in you settin' yourselves up ag'in my judgemnt."

"You all tongue to-day, Big Sam," replied the chief. "Too much talk, and too little do. Dark come soon, and the Gray Beaver will steal away."

"Jest what I was sayin', chief. You've no business to be stayin' here talkin', when you ought to be on the water. I don't think the old cuss could go very far, carryin' his gal and his plunder, but we mus'n't let him sneak off of that island. Git on the rafts now, and have done with your palaver."

Sam Hurst assumed command of one of the floats, supported by a dozen picked men of the Indians, and Markelle and Ara-po-wah took charge of the other. A number of the red men, laying their weapons on the rafts, swam behind the machines, pushing them out into the lake.

By this means, and with the aid of the sweeps, the unwieldy rafts were directed toward the island, which they approached slowly but steadily. The beautiful mass of greenery lay slumbering on the placid water, as sweetly and as innocently as a babe on it's mother's breast; but Big Sam and his rascally companions paid no heed to its beauty, and did not believe in its innocence, for they watched it with eager eyes, expecting, each moment, to see the form of a foe, or to be greeted by a hostile bullet.

As they drew near the island, Hirst's float was halted, while the other swept silently around to the other side, and then both advanced simultaneously. Still the quiet mass of foliage gave forth no sound or motion or sign of human life.

"I wonder ef it kin be possible that they ain't thar', arter all," muttered Hirst, as he cautiously stepped out on the turfy shore.

Bidding his men to follow him, he advanced silently toward the center of the island, keeping in cover as well as he could, and looking closely for the enemy that he expected to find, but he saw no sign of a hostile presence or occupation, until

he had reached nearly the other side, when he heard a rustling noise, and soon saw some dark forms stealing among the trees, as silently and carefully as himself.

"Here they are, Baptiste! Close in on 'em, Ara-po-war!" he shouted, firing his rifle at the nearest form.

He was answered, greatly to his dismay, by the shrill voice of Markelle.

"Sacre! Mille tonnerres!" indignantly exclaimed the Frenchman. "Vat you sall do, you beeg humbug? You shoot yourself, hey?"

Quite crestfallen, Big Sam advanced, and discovered that he had been firing into the other party, who had also effected a landing on the island. The result of his mistake was, that one of the Indians lay on the ground, severely wounded.

"Who in thunder would hev thought it was you?" growled the ruffian. "I 'lowed you wasn't goin' to land."

"You make too mooch haste to find some one who is not here," replied Markelle. "So you shoot yourself and your friends. You see any ole Bradlee here? You see any gal Bradlee here, hey? No, you see nossing bat in your own eyes."

"Wa-al, I kinder reckon they ain't here; in fact, I mought as well give in, and say they ain't; but they've been here, Baptiste; thar's plenty sign of that."

"Yes, ze sign is plain; zere is sign zat zey cut ze stakes, ze lectle trees, ze branches, and cover ze boat, and go 'way so."

"Do you stick to that notion yet, Baptiste? I won't say for sartin that you're wrong, but they may be on t'other ileyand, yonder."

The wounded man was taken care of, and the rafts were floated to the further and smaller island, which the banditti searched thoroughly, without discovering any trace of the fugitives.

"I'll hev to own up that you're right, Baptiste—you and Ara-po-war," said Big Sam. "The cusses hev got away from us; but I'll defy both of you to tell me whar they've gone to."

"Maybe so we know, pretty soon," said the chief, as a naked Indian came swimming toward them, and stepped up on the shore.

CHAPTER VII.

A GOOD GUESS.

THE man who so suddenly dropped down among the party in the rock, was Silas Bradley, as Harvey Dyce knew at a glance, for there was no mistaking the "Gray Beaver" for any other person. He was well advanced in years, but was a stout, burly person, who still seemed to retain much of the strength and fire of youth. His round, red and good-humored face would have been quite pleasing, if it had not been shaded by the furtive and suspicious look of his gray eyes. His long hair and beard were quite gray, and he wore a cap made of the skin of the gray fox. His hunter's garb of dressed skins showed no fanciful ornaments like that of Ben March, but was worn and stained, as if it had seen hard service. As he stepped down from the ladder, he shook himself like a water-dog, and then extended his hand to the strangers.

"Glad to see you, Ben March," said he. "'Tain't often I like to meet strangers, and I never yet asked one to come to this den of mine; but I'm glad to see *you*, old hoss, because I know your ways and I like 'em, and you're one of the few white men that I can tie to. And here's my old Delawar' friend, not a bit changed from when I met him, five years ago, up the Yellowstone. You're welcome, Johnny Jumper, and you know it. Silas Bradley never forgets a friend or an enemy. I see you've brought some strangers with you, Ben, and they look like green 'uns, but I s'pose they're all right, or they wouldn't be with you. Who mought they be?"

"This un, old man, is Harvey Dyce, a Missoura chap, who is travelin' round with me for his own fun, and he ain't quite as green as you mought think. When it comes to a square shot with a rifle, he ken hold his own."

"Travelin' for fun?" queried the old man, as he glanced suspiciously at Harvey. "So you come from Missoura, young man? All sorts of people come from Missoura. Did you ever know me or any of my folks?"

"I never heard of you before," answered Harvey.

"My wife's name was Rawlins when I married her—Martha Rawlins. Did you ever hear of her?"

"I never did."

"H-m-m—I s'pose not. It's queer, your travelin' out in this part of creation for fun. Hope you like it. Who's t'other one, Ben?"

"T'other one, old man, is a poor cuss of a Yankee—if he won't take offense at my callin' him so—that we picked up on the Californy trail. We're jist takin' keer of him—Mr. Dyce and I—until we can git him back to the States. I could never ketch a good holt of his name."

"Hah! A Yankee from sunrise, whar they print books, and make glass beads to swindle the Injuns with. It is a mortal long time since I saw one of those critters, I kin tell you."

"My name is Eliphalet Stebbins," interposed the Yankee, "and I come from New Hampshire, a State that has a tarnal poor sile, but can beat the nation at raisin' men."

"Good! Stand up for your settlement. You are both welcome, young men, so long as you behave yourselves. Mollie, that meat is cockin' to death. Why don't you take it off the fire? Come, men, draw up and pitch in. I reckon thar's enough for ail of us."

The old man set the example, which the others, nothing loth, quickiy followed, and the "chunks" of juicy meat rapidly disappeared before their forest appetites. Nothing was said during the meal, as Bradley was silent, and the others discreetly imitated him. Harvey Dyce did not pay as strict attention to the roasted beaver as the rest did, for he was occupied in watching Mollie Bradley, who had not sat down at the rude table, but busied herself in arranging matters around the cave, after she had helped Muggins, or Mr. Lyle, to the choicest part of the animal—the tail. She was so free and active, and yet so graceful and quiet in all her movements, that he could not help admiring her, and contrasting her with the beauties of "the settlements," somewhat to the disadvantage of the latter. He admired, too, her tender care of the lean and ugly pedagogue; but, most of all, he admired her large, bright and expressive eyes, that occasionally met the

glance of his own, and thrilled him with a nameless feeling he had never experienced before.

"And now we will talk about business," said Bradley, as he shoved back his stool, and filled his pipe.

The old man had not been too much absorbed in his dinner to notice the looks of admiration with which Harvey Dyce had regarded his daughter, and on that young gentleman he now turned his suspicious eyes, and to him he directed his conversation.

"Thar's one p'int," said he, "that must be explained and settled and fixed right before I go any further, and I may as well say here that I don't want to hurt any man's feelin's in speaking of it. Ben March tells me, young man, that you are travelin' in these parts for fun. I hope it's the right kind of fun. I hope it has nothin' to do with my gal. Did you come here after my Mollie, stranger?"

"I did not," answered Harvey, with a faint smile. "I never saw her—never heard of her until last night."

"Glad to hear it. From the way you looked at her while you were eatin'—you needn't turn so red, Mollie; thar's no harm done—I was afeard you mought have come to take her away from me, as others have tried to do; but they never got her away yet. I want to say, once for all, young man, that my gal is not be come after. Her mother gave her to me when she died, and Mollie is a good gal, and she means to stick to her old father until he goes under. I reckon you understand, and that's enough on that p'int."

Harvey Dyce nodded, and pretty Mollie Bradley blushed again.

"I wasn't surprised to see you," continued the old man, turning to March. "because I knew you had come. I went out this mornin' to look after Mollie, for she had been away all night, and I was kinder anxious about her, as I had seen Injun sign. When I got up near the hole where I keep my hosses, I caught sight of you, with Mollie and Muggins. I knew who you were, and I knew you were safe enough, as the gal would lead you on the trail to this place; so I went and tended to some business I had on hand up in the hills. I was on the cliff when the red-skins came down to the shore after you, and I watched you when you covered the canoe with

branches, and floated over here. That was a good thing, and it proves that my gal is smart."

"We're willin' to give in that she is smart, old hoss—as smart as she is purty, and that's sayin' a heap. Yet, I'm kinder afeard that the red-skins may hev' guessed the trick, and may track out this hidin'-place of yours."

"'Tain't likely, but what if they do? We ain't the men to be scared by a pack of howlin' red-skins."

"Thar's wuss'n Injuns the matter, Sile Bradley. Big Sam and Markelle are at the head of the gang."

"Thunder! You don't mean to tell me that! If those cusses are abroad, we must look out for ourselves. Are you sure?"

"Sart'in. Saw 'em both."

"Now I know what those signs meant that I saw around my traps this mornin'. That rascally Frencher has smelt me out, and is tryin' to find whar I hide. He has been huntin' for me ever since I rubbed out his brother for tryin' to rob me, upon the Fourche de Glace, and no Injun has a keener scent than he. It is me that they are both after, Ben March. They want my scalp and plunder, and if they know that Mollie is with me, they will be twice as 'arnest. I'm mortal glad that I have met you chaps, for the Frencher will take me, sure as death, and I would have a poor chance alone with Mollie, for Muggins don't count in a skirmmage."

"You kin bet your life, old Beaver, that we'll stand by you, and the cusses will hev a hard tussle afore they rub out this party."

"How did you happen to pick up old Muggins? He didn't go out with the gal."

Ben March related how the ex-pedagogue had been saved from death by the intervention of Dyce and his rifle.

"And so," continued the old man, turning sharply upon Lyle, "you've been gittin' yourself into trouble ag'in. What do you mean by huntin' up a skirmmage, and gittin' the daylight knocked out of you?"

"It could not properly be termed a skirmish," mildly replied the pedagogue. "'There was neither a combat nor a challenge to combat, on my part. I was discovered by a savage, who pursued me with, as I must presume, murderous

intentions. Knowing the uselessness of remonstrance, I was endeavoring to escape, when I unfortunately stumbled. It is true that the concussion of the brain so affected my sensorium, that it was unable, for a time to receive impressions of objects or events, but your reference to daylight is a mistaken one, as the accident occurred during the darkness of night."

"Jest listen to him!" admiringly exclaimed Bradley. "Don't he talk like a book! Only to think, how many big words he can use, and not say any thin' in partic'lar! I can't sizackly take in all he says, but my gal understands him, and can foller him as easy as I can skin a beaver. I don't suppose thar's such another scollard outside of the States. It's suthin' to brag on, to have a man like that to stick to you and stay with you; don't you think so, Mr. Dyce?"

"A very good thing to have 'in a family," answered Harvey.

"You're right thar, though I hain't got much of a family, and I'm proud of him. But, Lord love you! he can't take care of himself, no more'n a baby, and it riles me to think that he should go out to look after Mollie, when it is always her that has to look after him. I'm afeard I'll lose him some day."

"If you are no longer occupied with your culinary avocations, Miss Mary," said Lyle, "we may as well resume our geometrical exercises."

"Jest hear him, boys!" again exclaimed the old man. "Every one of those words would weigh a pound. That is one of the hard things he has been teachin' my gal. I reckoned it was witchcraft at fust, but Mollie says thar's no harm in it. Never mind your school-teachin' now, Muggins, for we've got the red-skins to look after, and mus'n't be bothered. S'pose you take a look out, and see whether any Injuns are in sight."

Muggins went to the entrance of the cave, and looked out across the lake. Soon he uttered an exclamation of wonder and dismay.

"Behold! the red-men have constructed floats, with which they design to attack our stronghold. Surely, the untutored denizens of the forest have labored with marvelous skill and rapidity. Propelled by sweeps, and swarming with savages,

their rude vessels of war sweep silently over the tranquil bosom of the aqueous element."

"What in thunder does the feller mean?" exclaimed Bradley. "I'm willin' to bet a hoss that my gal could tell, but I reckon I had better go and see."

"The devils are after us, boys," continued the old man, as he looked out. "They have made a couple of rafts, and are floatin' out on the lake, p'intin' for the biggest island. We needn't be troubled about it, though, for they've got an idee, no doubt, that we are hid away on the island yonder."

"Perhaps," suggested Dice, "when they have searched the island, and see that we are not there, they may be able to guess what has become of us."

"Like enough, young man, but it won't be so easy for 'em to guess whar we are. Come away from thar, Muggins, and let us all set down and have a bit of a talk, while the redskins are huntin' for what they can't find. Hark! thar goes a rifle. They've found suthin' to shoot at, and I'm glad it ain't us."

The old trapper produced a keg of rum, which he dealt out to his guests, who lighted their pipes, and proceeded to enjoy themselves as if no enemy was near. The conversation, however, was chiefly confined to Bradley and Ben March, who related their exploits in hunting, trapping and fighting, the stories growing more boastful and incredible as the narrators strove to out-do each other. The Delaware smoked in silence; the Yankee listened to the wonderful accounts with mouth and eyes wide open; Muggins occupied himself in drawing problems on the rock; and Harvy Dyce found pleasure in watching Mollie, with whom he exchanged a few words now and then.

Thus time passed swiftly until the day was near its close, when Muggins again went to the entrance of the cave to take an observation, and soon returned, with his hands upraised, and his eyes nearly starting from their sockets.

"All is lost!" he exclaimed. "I have discovered a ferocious savage, swimming in the lake, within a short distance of our habitation."

"Why in thunder can't you speak English?" said the old man, as he rose to his feet; but he was interrupted by the

Delaware, who had laid aside his blanket, and was moving toward the entrance of the cave. Waving his hand to enforce silence, he disappeared. There was a slight plunge in the water, and his friends waited anxiously for his return.

In the course of ten minutes he appeared, and silently resumed his seat.

"Did you see the Injun?" asked Bradley.

The Delaware held up a gory scalp.

"They've found us out, old man," said March.

"If they haven't, they've made a powerful good guess."

CHAPTER VIII.

ATTACK OF THE FLOTILLA.

THE party in the cave looked at each other, all apparently impressed by the same conviction, and were then silent for a few moments, until Bradley lifted his head, and spoke very deliberately :

"In course, they've guessed whar our hidin'-place is," said he, "and they'll be sart'in of it afore long. When we want to find out what our inimy thinks, and what he means to do, we ought to put ourselves in his place, as nigh as we can. Injuns are smart enough, but Big Sam and Markelle are a heap smarter, and we must try to think how the matter would look to them, or to us, if we were in thar place. They saw you go over to the island in the dugout, and didn't see you leave thar. Naturally they'd reckon that that was your stoppin' place, and no doubt they did, as they went thar' to hunt for you. In course they saw the dugout covered with branches, as it floated over here, for they notice every thin'. It's likely that they took it to be a floatin' tree, if it was managed well, and if they 'lowed you to be on the island. So far, so good ; but they went to the island, whar' they didn't find you, and whar they did find that you had been cuttin' branches. Then, I s'pose, they thought about that floatin' tree, and

could guess mighty well what it meant. What did you do with the branches, Ben?"

"Piled 'em up at the foot of the rock, so's to look as ef a tree had grounded thar."

"That was right, and I don't see how the thing could have been done better; but it's likely that those cusses are up to trap now, and that they know it ain't a tree. If it ain't a tree, they're bound to think that the dugout was covered with bushes, and that you landed here. In course they've kept a watch on this shore, and know that we hain't left it by water, and that we couldn't leave it any other way. As we wasn't able to climb up the rock, it's natural for 'em to think that we've gone into it, and thar's no human critter who knows more about holes and dens than that bloody Frencher. To my way of thinkin', boys, that's kinder reasonable."

"It is logical, and might be reduced to several distinct and unquestionable syllogisms," remarked the pedagogue. "Whatever is logical cannot be otherwise than reasonable."

"I don't see how you can call it silly, and at the same time allow it to be wise and reasonable. Hows'ever, I was goin' on to say that the cusses have sent a swimmer over here, to find out whether the tree is a tree, and to nose about ginerally. The Delawar's knife found that feller, and he went under. They wouldn't send any but one of thar best swimmers on sich an arrant, and when he don't come back, they'll know that we have got him. Tharfore it stands to reason that they'll know whar to find us."

"S'pose they do, ole beaver," said Ben March—"and thar's no gittin' out of it, 'cordin' to your way of reckonin' of it up—how in thunder are they goin' to git at us? Kinder strikes me that one man could keep the hull drove of 'em out of that openin'."

"True enough; we could block out the hull drove; but the hull drove can keep us blocked in."

"Is there not another opening, a sort of back door to this house of yours?" asked Harvey. "It seems to me that we might get out as you came in."

"True enough, ag'in, bnt how long do you s'pose it will be afore they find that out? Besides, thar's the gal and Muggins in the way, and I don't mind tellin' you, as I allow you

all to be honest men, that I've got a lot of skins and other plunder here, of consid'able valley. It couldn't be toted off in a hurry, and I wouldn't leave as much as a mushrat's skin of it to those rampagious robbers. It seems to me that we will have to give in to be cooped up here, like beavers in a lodge."

"Wal, ole hoss, I reckon we ken stand it as long as they ken," said Ben March.

"We mought stand it to all etarnity, if we had enough to eat, but I'm afeared the fodder would give out mighty soon. I hain't got much of a stock on hand, and it won't last long when thar's so many mouths to feed."

"The fire is comin' this way purty fast, and it may sweep over the hills and drive off the game, so that the red-skins will be in a wuss fix than we."

"It won't do to calkilate on the fire, Ben March. It's human natur to trust to onsartainties, but men who have lived in the world as long as we have, ought to know that they can't rightly count on anythin' except themselves. I don't like the idea of bein' shut up in this place."

"Fur my part, old man, I ken tell you that Ben March ain't the kind of a varmint that will stay shut up like a rat in a hole. Ef I can't dig out, I ken fight out, and I'm allers bound to hev plenty of fresh air and good grub. They once stuck me in a calaboose in the settlements, jest because of a kurlless kind of a skrimmage, but I felt smothered, and got out of thar powerful quick."

"With regard to provisions," interposed Harvey Dyce, "Ben seems to forget that we have a good supply of dried meat and flour and sugar and other articles. We brought but little with us when we crossed the lake, and cached the rest where we left our horses."

"You're right, my boy!" exclaimed March. "Went a thunderin' fool I was not to think of that afore! Ef we had all that grub, we could hold out for a week or so, sartin. As fur fresh meat, I'm bound to hev that as long as my name is Ben March, in spite of all the redskins on airth, but that's my own lookout."

"Some of us must sneak up thar, to-morrer, and git it," said the old man. "I will go up to my traps airly in the

mornin', and git what beaver ther are, and bring in the traps. Then a couple of us will go to the cache for some grub, and I reckon we will find it easy to sarcumvent the red rascals and the white devils. I reckon I'll look out on the lake, and see what the cusses are doin'."

The old man went to the entrance of the cave, and Harvey Dyce accompanied him. They carefully put aside the foliage by which the opening was concealed, and peered out on the dark and tranquil water.

The sun had set and there was no moon, but the crimson, lurid light in the western sky, which Harvey had noticed during several nights, seemed brighter and nearer than ever, shedding an unearthly radiance upon the lake and the surrounding hills and forests, although the fire was still at a distance. The atmosphere had grown more dense and murky, and was more irritating to the eyes and more parching to the skin, than it had yet been. It was evident that a great conflagration was raging, sweeping everything before it, and that it was rapidly moving toward the east.

As the young man looked out on the lake, he could plainly perceive two large and dark masses, floating on the water, close to the nearest island. They were, as he supposed, the rafts of which Muggins had spoken so grandiloquently, and he could dimly perceive the dark forms of men upon the floats and on the shore of the island.

"Thar they are," muttered old Bradley. "Thar are the cussed red rascals, and the white scoundrels who are ten times as mean and bloody as the red-skins. Injuns will be Injuns; it's ther natur, but white men can beat 'em in all kinds of deviltry and bloody-minded rascality, when they set ther minds onto it. Thar's no kind of death too hard for such white men. Thar's Big Sam, as stout and cruel as a grizzly, and not half as decent. And thar's Markelle, as sneakin', crafty and wicked a wretch as ever lived. I'm keen to sw'ar that he never had an honest thought in his life. He'd murder a suckin' baby, if he could git a little plunder by it. His brother was as bad as he, and when I rubbed him out, up on the Fourche de Glace, this 'un swore eternal vengeance on me, and it's as sure as death that he'll stick to his sw'ai. It kinder comes over me, that either he or I will

have to go under, afore this thing is over. It's me they've come after—me and my plunder and my gal,—though I reckon none of the rest of us would git any mercy from 'em. How that devil of a Frencher would grin, if he could git hold of my gal! I think I can see his white teeth shine and his wolf eyes glisten. Ah! you dog, and son of a dog! You'll hev to cut through one old man's heart afore you git at her. If she was safe!—only if she was safe!—”

“For one, I can promise you that I will defend her with my life!” warmly exclaimed Harvey Dyce.

“Oh! are you thar, young man?” said Bradley, suddenly aroused from his reverie. “No doubt you will fight for her, young man, and so will the rest. If I should happen to be rubbed out in this here business, and you should git off safe, will you promise to take keer of Mollie? I think I can trust her to you, for you've an honest look, and I know Ben March well, and I know that you wouldn't be on the trail with him unless you were a good man. Will you promise to take keer of my gal, like a true man, and carry her back to the settlements, back to old Missoura? Will you promise me that?”

“I promise, most sincerely; but you should not give way to such gloomy thoughts.”

“Never mind the thoughts, young man. We don't make 'em, and must take 'em as they come. Give me your hand on that promise, and mark you, if it ain't kept as it ought to be, thar's a God who never forgits the orphans!”

“I swear to you by the memory of my mother,” solemnly answered Harvey, “that I will do what you ask, as a true and honest man.”

“Those words suit me. Look yonder now, young man. Look over toward the island. They hev shoved off, and the rafts are movin' this way. It's jest as I said—they know whar to find us, and are pointin' for the right place. But I don't see any men. The rafts are mighty high out of the water, and the cusses may be lyin' down close. Your eyes are younger'n mine, and maybe better. Can you see anythin' human about those floats?”

“I doubt if my eyes are better than yours,” answered Harvey; “but I have another pair that may help me.”

He drew from his pocket a leather case, which he opened,

uncovering a small opera glass. This he fitted to his eyes, and gazed at the approaching flotilla.

"I can see it plainly now," said he. "They have a sort of breastwork of logs, behind which men are lying down. Others are swimming, and pushing the rafts before them."

"Just let me look through that thing a minute," said Bradley. "I reckon it must be some kind of a spy-glass."

Harvey gave the glass to the old man, showing him how to adjust it to his sight, and Bradley uttered an exclamation of wonder as he finally succeeded in bringing the rafts into the focus.

"You're right," said he, as he returned the lorgnette. "Take good keer of that double-barreled spy-glass, for it's a powerful fine thing. I see how they mean to ketch us, but they'll find this old beaver is up to trap. Come inside."

Harvey followed the old man into the cave, where the latter explained the situation of affairs to his companions, and advised them to prepare for an immediate attack.

"The cusses are tol'able smart," said he; "they think they are safe enough behind their breastwork, as Mr. Dyce calls it, but they'll be woke up out of that notion mighty sudden. If you will stay down here and guard the hole, Ben, with the Delawar', Dyce and I will go up above, and take 'em from the top of the rock. I'm keen to bet that your Yankee friend, thar, can shoot a rifle at an inimy."

"I rayther guess I kin, Mister, answered Eliphalet. "We used to stick up a red-coat to fire at, on gineral trainin' days, and the way I bored holes into him was a caution to half-inch augers."

"You may come up above with us, and try your hand. Keep a good lookout, Ben, and don't fire unless you're driv' to it, or unless you see a mighty good chance. Follow me, young men, and be keerful to keep your weepins dry."

Dyce and the Yankee followed the old man up the ladder, from the top of which they stepped into a small and slanting hole in the rock, through which flowed the rivulet that fell into the cave. The passage was not as difficult as it appeared to be, and they soon emerged, through a clump of bushes, on the summit of the cliff, which was almost bare of trees or other vegetation. Walking forward to the edge

they crouched behind some stones, and watched their enemies on the rafts below.

Those in the cave were also keeping a good watch, having stationed themselves near the entrance, where they could easily see all that was passing on the lake.

On came the rafts, slowly and silently, until they were within a stone's throw of the shore, but there was no sign of human life visible on or about them. One of them was then stopped, and the other came on a few rods further, where it, also, was halted. Still there was no sign of life, until Ben March observed a slight motion at the side of the raft, and soon the head of a swimming Indian was seen, approaching the shore.

The swimmer reached the cliff, but found no landing place, for there was none, except at the entrance of the cave. He felt his way along the rock, until he came to the bushes that covered the opening. Putting these aside, he cautiously swam in, until he could feel the bottom with his feet. March and the Delaware, concealed from view, were eagerly watching every movement. As he caught sight of the dugout, drawn up on the stones, he stopped.

"Ugh!" he grunted, as he stood up in the water, and laid his hand on a rock.

The movement was fatal to him, for the knife of the Delaware, who was concealed behind the rock, was immediately plunged into his heart.

As the Indian was struck, he uttered a shrill cry, which was answered by a howl of rage from his friends on the raft, for they knew that it was a death-yell.

In their anger, they sent a volley of bullets and arrows at the place where their spy had disappeared, but it was harmless, and was unanswered.

Apparently satisfied that they had found the hiding place of the "Gray Beaver," their swimmers were again set at work, and the raft again moved toward the cave.

Suddenly the reports of three rifles were heard, from the cliff above them, and three of the Indians who were lying behind the breastwork leaped up, and fell dead. As they jumped to their feet, amazed at this unexpected attack, the deadly aim of Ben March and the Delaware brought down

two more of their number. At the same time, the contents of Harvey Dyce's navy revolver were sent among them, increasing their dismay. Unable to return the fire that was slaughtering them, they leaped into the water, concealing themselves, as well as they could, behind the logs, and swam off with the raft, until they reached the island. The other raft was anchored in its position, and remained there, as if for the purpose of blockading the cave and preventing the escape of its inmates by water.

"Wal, old beaver, we made 'em scamper," said March, when all were again collected within the cave. "That's what I call a good thing."

"It was a bad thing, Ben, and I'm sorry for it," sadly answered the old man.

"How so?"

"I'm sorry that we fired on 'em from the top of the rock, for the cusses will soon be sartin that we've got a hole to git up through, and it won't be long afore they find out whar it is. We must keep a good watch on 'em to-night, as we can't do anythin' more."

CHAPTER IX.

AN IMPORTANT CAPTURE.

SILAS BRADLEY and the Delaware relieved each other in keeping guard at the entrance of the cave during the night, but the situation of affairs, as far as they could see, remained unchanged. The blockading raft was still in its position, within an easy rifle shot of the cliff, and the other was moored at the smallest island. There was but little sign of life or motion about either, but the camp-fires of the red-skins and their white allies could plainly be seen on the island.

The light in the western sky still grew redder and brighter, and the atmosphere seemed hourly to become more oppressive, so that the watchers panted for breath at times, and sought relief by bathing their heads and hands in the cool water within the mouth of the cave.

Harvey Dyce, after what Bradley had confided to him in the early part of the night, and after the promise he had made to the old man, felt himself drawn closer to Mollie, and took a deeper interest in that forest maiden. He watched her by the firelight, as she moved about her rude home, preparing their simple supper, and "putting things to rights," while the men smoked their pipes. In every thing that she did, there was a womanly dignity and an artless grace, as well as a free and self-reliant air that was peculiarly her own, by which the young man was so charmed, that he could not keep his eyes from following her motions. Add to this admiration the feeling that she had been confided to him as a sacred trust, that she was something he was bound to care for and protect, and the two sentiments formed an emotion that might easily strengthen into love. As her blue eyes met the frequent gaze of the young man, her fleeting blushes and pleasant smiles showed that his admiration was not wholly lost upon its object.

He longed to tell her of her father's misgivings and forebodings, and to assure her that he, with her father's sanction and at his request, would defend and cherish her, through all difficulties and perils; but he feared that she might become infected by the gloomy feelings of the old man, and he concluded that it would be better to let his thoughts and emotions speak through his actions.

The ex-schoolmaster, after vainly reminding Mollie of her "geometrical exercises," and hinting that she was wasting valuable time, betook himself to figuring upon a piece of slate-stone, in which exciting pursuit he became so absorbed that he fell asleep.

At an early hour the next morning, all were aroused by Silas Bradley, who had stood the last watch at the mouth of the cave, and who reported that he had not been able to perceive any movement on the part of the enemy.

He told his companions that it would not be long, in all probability, before they would be completely blockaded in the cave, and that they must make haste, if they wished to secure provisions enough to enable them to stand a siege.

Ben March and the Delaware at once volunteered to go and open the cache in the glen where the horses had been left, and their services were accepted, as they were the most

experienced men in the party, with the exception of Bradley. It was useless for them to attempt to go by water, as the Indians would be sure to cut off their return, even if they should be unable to prevent their departure. Accordingly, they partook of a hasty breakfast that Mollie prepared for them, went up through the hole in the rear of the cave, and set off for the cache on foot.

Harvey Dyce, with the rest of his companions, took breakfast in a more leisurely manner, and when the meal was over, he went to the mouth of the cave to reconnoiter the position of the enemy. He soon perceived some commotion among them, and observed that they had been constructing a smaller raft, with which they were paddling between the island and the opposite shore of the lake, but he was unable to determine what their purpose was. After a while, he noticed that the raft at the island, crowded with men, had also set out for the opposite shore, and he then reported the facts to Silas Bradley.

The old man looked through Harvey's opera-glass, which he praised as being "jest wuth its weight in solid gold," and came to the conclusion that one raft load of the red-skins was going to the other shore.

"It's clear to me," said he, "that they mean to find the hole by which we git out on the land side, and to shut us in on that quarter. But, as nigh as I can make out, they've got ther dead and wounded men on that raft, and they will take them to the main land, and hold a pow-wow over them before they do anythin' else. It is sartin, though, that they'll be after us soon enough, and we musn't lose any time in doin' what we've got to do. When the boys git back from the cache, you and I will go up to the traps, if you've a mind to, and bring 'em in."

In the course of two hours, Ben March and the Delaware returned, with supplies of provisions; but they had brought such small loads, owing to the roughness of the path which they had been obliged to travel, that Ben March declared it would be necessary to make another trip. The Delaware had cut his foot so badly that he was unable to return, and Ben requested Dyce to accompany him. The young man at once agreed to do so, but Silas Bradley objected.

"Reckon you mought as well take some 'un else, Ben," said he. "I want Dyce to go up to the traps with me, as he's light and active, and any other man will do to tote things from the cache. Why not take Muggins? He can git over ground mighty fast, and I know him to be a good hand at a portage. You can take keer of him, Ben, and he'll do the job as well as anybody."

"I'm satisfied," answered Ben, "if the old chap is willin' "

The pedagogue protested that his legs and his shoulders, as well as his heart and his mind, were entirely devoted to the service of his kind friends, and that he would proceed on the errand with pleasure.

"Take keer of him, Ben; he needs watchin'," was the parting injunction of the old man, as the two messengers mounted the ladder, and disappeared through the opening of the water-course.

"Come, young man," said Bradley; "we had better be lookin' after those traps. The Delaware ain't hurt too bad to keep guard over the camp here, and our Yankee friend, I know, can shoot well enough to help him, if need be."

Cheered by a pleasant smile from Mollie, who had insisted on binding up the wounded foot of the Delaware, Harvey followed his guide up through the opening, and out into the free, but not fresh, air of the mountains. The atmosphere was more stifling than ever, and the young man's eyes burned and smarted as if he was walking through smoke. Looking toward the west, he saw that the clouds of fire and vapor had increased in size as well as in brilliancy, and fancied that he could almost hear the roaring of the flames, and see the headlong rush of the frantic droves of wild animals, as they strove to escape the devouring element. It was evident that the great conflagration was swiftly surging toward the mountains.

Down on the lake, looking over the edge of the cliff, they could see several Indians sitting and lying on the blockading raft, with one white man, whom Harvey supposed to be Big Sam. They appeared to be doing nothing, but the small raft, paddled by two men, was approaching them from the other shore, and appeared to be loaded with the carcass of a deer.

"The fire is workin' toward us tol'able fast," said the old

man, shaking his head, gloomily. "I shouldn't be a bit surprised to see it all around us in the course of a few days. The red-skins down yonder don't mean to starve, and they seem determined to stick it out. I wish I could be sure of seein' the eend of it; but I know that you will remember your promise, young man, whatever happens. Let's be trampin', for we've no business to be losin' time here."

The old man led the way to a clump of bushes, by the side of the little stream that fell down into the cave, from which shelter he drew out a small and light bark canoe, which he easily put on his left shoulder, carrying his rifle in his right hand. He stepped into the brook, followed by Harvey, and they thus walked through the shallow water for a considerable distance, until they ascended some diminutive rapids, and found themselves on the shore of a swampy lake, in the midst of a forest, where the old man launched his canoe.

Bradley took his seat at the bow of the boat, and Dyce seated himself in the stern—if the "double-ender" could be said to have either bow or stern—and the former paddled silently around the shores of the lake, examining his traps, taking them up, and carefully placing them in the canoe.

At this place the trapper found two beaver, and one of his traps had been carried off by another, which, he said, had probably become entangled in the logs at the bottom of the river, and had drowned there. At another time he would have searched for the animal, and would have secured it, although it might have cost him a swim, but he had no time to spare that morning.

From the lake the old man paddled into a sluggish stream, lined with cottonwoods and overhung by willows, along the banks of which he coasted carefully. Here he found all his traps safe, and a beaver in one of them. He expressed himself well satisfied with his luck, and paddled back across the lake, to the place where he had launched the canoe.

Here he cut a stout stick, on which he slung the three beaver, and gave them to Harvey to carry, together with some of the traps. The rest of the traps, and the canoe, he carried himself, and the two men waded down the little brook, returning to the cave as they had come.

When they reached the clump of bushes that served as a shelter for the canoe, Bradley set it down with a sigh of satisfaction.

"Stay thar, old boat," said he, as he hid it under the foliage. "I reckon I'll never have use for you agin, but I don't want you to fall into wuss hands."

"You ought not to allow yourself to be troubled with such thoughts," remarked Harvey.

"We don't make our thoughts, young man, as I told you afore. We don't make 'em, and we can't help 'em; but you mus'n't tell my gal that I've got any queer notions. Thar, by thunder, I've left my knife up at the lake, whar we landed, and whar I cut that stick you're carryin'. I don't know when I've been so keerless afore, but suthin seems to hev come over me."

"Let me step up there and get it for you," said Harvey. "It will take me but a few minutes, and I will be back by the time you get this plunder put away."

"Wal, if you will, I'll be obleeged to you, young man. I reckon thar's no danger, but you must be keerful. Give me your rifle, and I will carry it down with the other traps."

Harvey Dyce handed the old man his rifle, and again set out, wading up the course of the little stream. He safely reached the lake, found the knife where it had been left, and started to return.

He was about half-way back to the cave, when he was surprised at seeing a rifle leaning against a tree, a short distance from where he was.

"How could it have come there? Whose could it be?" he thought, as he stopped in the stream.

He solved his doubts by stepping to the tree and taking the weapon, which was a short and heavy rifle that he did not remember to have seen before.

"It belongs either to a friend or an enemy," he muttered. "If it belongs to a friend, it is safe in my hands; if it belongs to an enemy, I am safe in keeping it."

As he looked around, he was again surprised at seeing a man, about twenty yards from the place where he had found the rifle. At first he supposed the stranger to be an Indian but another glance showed that he was a white man.

"Either Big Sam or Markelle," thought Harvey, as he raised the rifle, debating with himself whether he ought to shoot.

The stranger was bending down, looking at the ground, as if seeking for a trail, and was so absorbed in this occupation that he did not notice the presence of another, until a slight noise that the young man made caused him to raise his head, and Harvey knew him, although he had never seen him before, except at a distance. He recognized the shining white teeth and the wolf-like eyes, of which Bradley had spoken, and he knew that the stranger was Baptiste Markelle.

He instantly leveled the rifle and pulled the trigger, but the weapon missed fire, and the Frenchman ran off like a deer.

Harvey's first impulse was to pursue him ; but, on second thought, he concluded that it would not be advisable, as he was almost unarmed, and he again walked toward the cave, until his attention was arrested by a chorus of horrid yells and whoops, proceeding from a ravine at his left.

Looking in that direction, he saw Ben March and Muggins, struggling with several savages, and surrounded by a number of the shrieking demons. March was cursing, and trying to shake off the grasp of his captors, and Muggins was remonstrating with them in the choicest style of oratory.

The young man would fain have attempted a rescue ; but he shook his head with a sigh, as he thought of the useless weapon in his hands and the heavy odds against him. Indeed, he was obliged to look to his own safety, for the yelling fiends caught sight of him, and rushed forward to make another capture. He at once took to flight, and gained the shelter of the cave, slipping down into the narrow entrance just in time to escape a shower of bullets and arrows.

CHAPTER X.

HUNTING FOR HOLES.

THE naked Indian who stepped up on the shore of the little island, when Markelle and his allies had come to the conclusion that the fugitives they were seeking were not concealed on that or the other island, was a swimmer, who had been sent over to the cliff by Ara-po-wah, at the instance of Markelle, to ascertain for a certainty whether the supposed tree, that had floated ashore at that place, was really a tree, or a collection of boughs that had been used for concealing a canoe.

He soon satisfied the three leaders that the latter opinion was the correct one, and Markelle could not suppress a grin of satisfaction, and a slight insinuation at the expense of his comrade in villainy.

"Larf away, ef you want to," growled Hirst; "but I wouldn't treat you that sort. When a man gives in that he's wrong, and admits the corn, can't you let the thing drop, and quit crowin over him?"

"I let him drop, and I crow not at all; but be not so certain ze nex time, my beeg friend."

"Let it drop, then, and tell me what you mean to do. As it's sartin that the critturs we are arter landed over thar, whar are they now?"

"Not far from zere, if I make ze good guess."

"I'm keen to sw'ar that they couldn't climb that pile of rocks."

"Not a beet; but p'raps zey crawl in von leetle hole. I have seen many hole, and have crawl in 'em myself."

"You'll crawl into a hole some time, that you'll never come out of."

"We sall find ze Gray Bevaire in a hole, and we sall shut him up in ze hole, like ze b'ar in ze holler tree, and we sall smoke him out, jest like ze b'ar. P'raps we sall burn his fur, but we must not spile ze fair skin of his pretty leetle gal."

"The fust thing is to find the hole. Ara-po-war, s'pose you send your swimmin' chap over ag'in, and let him look for a hole in the rock. It must be near that pile of brush, if it's anywhar."

"Good. Better we all go, too," answered the Indian.

After consultation, it was determined that the whole party, on the two rafts, should go toward the rocky shore, and stop within a short distance of the cliff, ready to make an attack, in case the retreat of the fugitives should be discovered.

They advanced, as has been seen, the raft commanded by Big Sam pushing up the nearest to the rock. When the death-yell of the spy informed them that he had found the "hole," the prudence of the wary Frenchman would have counselled against an attack, but the impatience of Hirst was not to be restrained. He assaulted the stronghold, relying on his breastwork, and hoping to carry it by a dash, but was signally defeated. He would still, in his blind obstinacy, have endeavored to fight his unseen enemy, had he not been deserted by his crew, who retreated with the raft, in spite of his threats and expostulations.

Although Big Sam was surprised at being greeted by a fire from the top of the cliff, such was not the case with Markelle, who had expected just such a contingency.

When Big Sam, furious at his defeat, returned to the island, and the two white men and the chief again held counsel together, Markelle explained his opinions on this point, and made known the conclusions at which he had arrived.

He said that he had not doubted, if the Gray Beaver's hiding place should prove to be a hole in the cliff, that the trapper had another means of exit, by which he could reach the high ground. He had expected, therefore, that they would be fired upon from above, and would have advised that an attack should not be hastily made. The attempt had not been useless, however, as it had proved what he had for some time suspected.

He had first been led to believe that Bradley was in that neighborhood, by the discovery of traps that he knew to be his.

The traps were set on the borders of a small lake and the

banks of a stream, among the hills, and it was not to be supposed that the old trapper would live on one of those islands, or in a hole at the base of that cliff, from either of which places he would be compelled to take an open and circuitous route to reach his traps. He would have his camp, as a matter of course, within a reasonable distance of his traps, so that he could visit them secretly and without too much labor.

Markelle said that he had twice examined the traps, had seen Bradley's "sign" about them, and had noticed the place at which he was in the habit of landing with his boat, but had been unable to follow his trail, or to find any trace of him beyond the beaver lake. It was now plain that there was a connection between the base of the cliff and the high ground, by means of a passage up through the cliff.

"If I make ze good guess," continued the Frenchman, "zere is one beeg hole, near ze wataire, vere ze Gray Bevaire have his lodge. Zere is von leetle hole, vere he crawl up to ze top of ze rock. We sall find ze leetle hole, and stop him up, and zen we sall smoke out ole Bradlee, like ze b'ar in ze holler tree."

"Good!" grunted Ara-po-wah. "But better not stop up the hole. Better watch it close. May be so we git in thar some time."

"You're both right," said Hirst, who was now disposed to defer to the opinions of his comrades. "How's'ever, the fust thing is to find the hole, and we'd better set about it 'arly in the mornin'. Ef thar is a hole, we know jist whar to go to hunt fur it, and it seems to me that it'll be right to leave one of the rafts here in the lake, with part of the men, to watch the hole that we know of, while the rest go up on the hill to look for t'other hole. When that is found, and a good watch is set on it, we ken try the smokin'-out business that Baptiste speaks of."

As these views were identical with those that were already entertained by the other two men, they readily acquiesced, and it was arranged that a smaller raft should be built, and that the land expedition should set out at an early hour the next morning.

In the morning, however, the plan was delayed by the ill-

dians, who had a "medicine man" among them, and who wished to carry their slain to the main land, and bury them with ceremonies peculiar to themselves. As the two white men knew that they would incur the enmity of their red allies by such a mark of disrespect as remaining away from the burial, they reluctantly attended, and watched the proceedings with impatience.

Leaving the scene as soon as possible, Big Sam went back to take charge of the blockading raft, and Markelle, telling Ara-po-wah to follow with his warriors, as soon as he could, started off toward the hills in the rear of Bradley's cave, to endeavor to track the "Gray Beaver" to his hole, and secure the honor of the discovery.

He reached the swampy lake among the hills a short time after old Bradley and Harvey Dyce, with the traps and the beaver they had captured, had returned to the cave.

He at once perceived that the old man had been visiting and removing his traps, and was at no loss to conjecture what his motive had been in so doing. He cursed the Indians for the delay by which he had been prevented from being on the spot early enough to follow Bradley as he carried home his spoils, and went down to the landing place, where he saw fresh tracks in the soft mud, and noticed that a stick had been freshly cut.

As he was unable to trace the tracks beyond the rapids, he concluded to turn aside into the timber, hoping to find a trail. He soon saw one that was quite plain and fresh. In his eagerness to follow it, he leaned his rifle against a tree, and walked along, eagerly examining the ground as he went. Soon the trail became confused, and he bent down to examine it. As he did so, he heard a rustling of leaves and the breaking of a twig. He started up, looked around, and saw a young man, a short distance from him, leveling his own rifle at his head.

Markelle knew that the stranger was one of the fugitives of whom he was in pursuit, but he took only a hasty glance, and turned and fled, not stopping to notice that the rifle missed fire as he went.

While the Frenchman was searching for a trail, other events were transpiring, further down the range of hills.

Markelle had been gone but a short time, when Ara-po-wah followed him with his picked warriors. Silently and cautiously as they moved, they were yet more silent and cautious when one of the Indians in advance suddenly stopped at the foot of a ravine, and motioned to them to halt. The chief stole up to the scout, and was pointed toward the head of the ravine, where he saw two white men, with packs on their backs.

They were Ben March and Muggins, and the hunter was endeavoring to persuade his companion not to go into the ravine, for the Indians could plainly hear every word that was said.

"Don't go down thar, old chap," entreated Ben. "What's the use? This is the nighest way, and we haint got no time fur to lose."

"I only desire to secure a plant that I see growing yonder," answered the pedagogue, as he commenced to descend the ravine. "I am inclined to believe tha. it is a rare species of the *Umbelliferæ*, an order that I have seldom met with in this region. It will take but a moment, and the acquisition to science may be invaluable."

"Confound your long speeches and your big words! Ef you're bound to go, I'll go with you, but I wish I had made this trip alone."

Ara-po-wah quickly made his arrangements, placing several of his stoutest braves behind a rock near which the white men would be obliged to pass, and directing them to rush out and seize the messengers when they passed.

Down the ravine they came, the hunter grumbling and the schoolmaster talking volubly, until they reached the spot where the coveted plant grew, and where their enemies were in ambush.

As Muggins laid aside his pack and stooped down to pluck the blossom, and as Ben March sneeringly watched him, Ara-po-wah gave the signal, and the red men rushed upon their unsuspecting victims.

March's rifle was snatched from his grasp and his arms were pinioned behind his back before he was fully aware of what had happened. He raved and swore, and vainly strove to burst his bonds, but only succeeded in exciting the yells and

jeers of his captors. Muggins was more calm, and sought to argue the question with the Indians.

"What have I done to you, you rude and impertinent savages?" he indignantly exclaimed. "How have I injured you that I should be bound and persecuted? I have only desired to pluck a flower that I might analyze and classify it at my leisure; but you seem to care nothing for the cause of science so long as you can gratify your vile and depraved appetites."

He was continuing to speak in this style, when his expostulations were suddenly brought to a close by a severe blow on the mouth, and the savages, catching sight of Harvey Dyce, rushed forward to effect another capture.

When Dyce disappeared in the cave, their yells and shouts were redoubled, for they at once knew they had found the "hole" for which they were searching.

Here they were joined by Markelle, who placed a strong guard over the entrance to the cave, remaining in charge of it himself, while Ara-po-wah, with the rest of his warriors, went back to the lake with the captives.

Ben March had ceased his cursing and threatening, and he made no more complaints, but he cast a reproachful look upon Muggins as he was led away.

"I hope, old chap," said he, sadly, "that you'll take good keer of that flower."

The poor old pedagogue at once perceived the error that he had committed, and the trouble that he had brought on his companion as well as himself, and he hung his head and burst into tears.

From the shore of the lake Ara-po-wah ferried his prisoners over to the little island, where they were triumphantly received by Big Sam, who caused them to be more securely bound, and transferred them to the blockading raft. The raft was then moved in a little nearer to the cliff, where it was anchored, and the captives were compelled to stand up in order that their friends in the cave might perceive their situation and observe their sufferings.

CHAPTER XI.

NOT FOND OF WHIPPING.

SILAS BRADLEY had safely deposited his traps and his beavers in the cave, and was awaiting the arrival of Harvey Dyce, when the sound of firing above, and the sudden appearance of that young gentleman, who came tumbling down the ladder from the upper entrance, told him that something had happened. He seized his rifle and stood ready to defend the passage against any intruder, but a moment's reflection convinced him that no one would attempt pursuit by such a narrow and difficult path, and he listened calmly to Harvey's statement.

Bad as it was, he was not prepared for the full extent of the calamity that was disclosed to him. He had at once known as a matter of course, that the entrance to his niding-place had been discovered, but he had not thought of the possible capture of the two couriers, Ben March and Muggins.

When he learned of this misfortune, he sat down, covered his face with his hands, and was silent for a few moments. When he spoke, it was to lament the loss of Muggins, and to blame himself for having sent the ex-schoolmaster on such an errand, hardly seeming to consider the capture of Ben March, a priceless man in such an emergency, of sufficient importance to be mentioned.

"Wal, my friends," he said, after his emotion had subsided. "They've got this old beaver in a trap whar he seems bound to stay, until they come along and take him out. Are you sartin it was Markelle that you saw up yonder young man?"

"I think it was, judging from his looks, for he had the shining white teeth and the wolfish eyes that you spoke of last night. Here is his rifle."

"Let me see it. Yes, it's his weepin; I've had it in my hands afore, and here is his mark on the handle. It is some farrin-made thing, I reckon, too heavy and unhandy for my

use, but I've heerd him say that nothing could outshoot it. What a pity it missed fire when you leveled at him!"

"It is a great pity; the cap had been wet, I suppose, and I had no time to try another. Do you think they'll venture to attack us through that hole?"

"Sca'cely. They are none of 'em, red or white, such durned fools as that. Only one of 'em could crawl through that place at a time, and we could easy take 'em, one by one, as they came. They won't be apt to try that dodge, young man. The pint of the business is, that they are out and can't git in, and we are in and can't git out, and they calkilate, with a considerable show of sense, that we are in the wust fix of the two."

"What do you suppose they intend to do?"

"My idee is that they mean to starve us out, if they can't git at us any other way. That they can starve us out seems tol'able sartin, for we've got mighty little grub to go on. Those three beaver will help us, and so will the stuff that was brought in from the cache this morning. We mought hev got along better, if it hadn't been for the loss of that other load. What a confounded fool I was, to send poor old Muggins off on that arrant! I shall never forgive myself for that. I mought hev knowed that he would git into trouble, 'cause he's entirely onfit to take keer of himself, or to go anywhar out of my sight and hearin'. He's lost now, and it stands to reason that I'll never see him ag'in."

"It is a great pity, and I am very sorry for him," said Harvey; "but it seems to me that the capture of Ben March is a much greater misfortune for us. Such a sure shot as such a brave man we can not well afford to spare at a time like this."

"True enough; it's like cuttin' off a right arm; but Ben is used to roughin' it, and he can stand trouble and hard treatment better'n that poor old chap. I reckon Muggins will bother the heads of Sam Hurst and the red-skins with those big words of his. Wal, boys, we may as well be lookin' after suthin to eat. Whar's those beaver?"

The Delaware had already skinned one of the animals, while Stebbins was keeping watch at the mouth of the cave, and Mollie had hung it before the fire to roast.

"The sight of that beaver roastin' thar," said the old man, "makes me think of suthin that ain't very pleasant. I think it quite likely that those critters, when they see that they can't git at us will try to burn us out of here."

"Think they can dew it, mister?" eagerly asked the Yankee.

"I think that I could do it, if I stood in thar mocassins; leastwise, I should take a try at it. Seems to me it would be easy to float up a lot of bush ag'inst the hole thar', set fire to it and jam it atween the rocks, so's to make us mighty uncomfortable in here."

The Yankee said nothing more, but fell into a brown study, from which he roused himself after a while, and asked Harvey to give him the india-rubber blanket that he always carried with him. The article was handed to him, and he set at work upon it with his knife, after scratching his head and making some abstruse calculations, cutting it up for some purpose that was known only to himself, and into which no one else cared to inquire. In the course of the afternoon Harvey Dyce noticed with some chagrin, that a confidence had been established between Stebbins and Mollie Bradley and that they frequently had their heads together over that india-rubber blanket.

When Dyce and the old man had satisfied their hunger, they gave way to the other, and took their turns at watching, the former going to the water entrance of the cave, and the latter to the rear entrance, for both required to be guarded, and it was evident that the services of two men would be constantly needed for this purpose.

Shortly after Harvey had taken his station he perceived an unusual commotion on the little island, and could hear the Indians yelling as if there was some great excitement among them. Then he saw the smallest raft, that was used as a ferry-boat, moving over to the blockading raft, with two bound men lying down upon it. By the aid of his opera-glass, he made them out to be Ben March and Muggins, and he could also see that Big Sam was with them.

Arrived at the large raft, the captives were received with more yelling and were thrown out upon the logs where their legs were unbound, and they were permitted to sit up. The

raft was then floated a few rods further in toward the rocky shore, where it was again anchored.

After a while, the two prisoners were forced to stand up, with a stout Indian at the back of each, in order that they might be shown to their friends in the cave. Harvey told Silas Bradley to come and witness the sight, and the old man wept as he saw his two friends bound, helpless, and at the mercy of the infuriated savages, and felt how powerless he was to aid them; but his sympathy still seemed to be more strongly excited for the simple-minded pedagogue than for the brave and useful hunter.

"They'll kill that poor old cuss," said he. "They'll kill him, fur sartin. They can't understand his big words, and won't know what he means when he begs for his life. It's all my fault. I shoved him into this scrape, and I ought to git him out of it, if thar's any way of doin' the job."

"If any thing could be done to save Ben March, it would be worth while to make the effort," said Harvey, who was really indignant at the old man for neglecting to speak of the hunter, and bestowing all his sympathy upon the useless schoolmaster.

"A braver and truer man never lived," he continued. "If we had his strong arm and his good rifle and his sound judgment to aid us now, we would stand a better chance to escape from those scoundrels."

"It might be so," sadly answered the trapper; "but I'm doubtin' whether anythin' could bring us out of this trouble. It is a pity that they couldn't both be saved. If my gal was only out of danger, if I was only sure that she would go through alive, I would be willin' to die, but I hate to leave her in sech a fix. What are they doin' now, young man? S'pose you level that spy-slass of yours at 'em, and tell me what 's goin' on."

The little raft had been brought alongside of the large one, and Big Sam got on it, together with two Indians, who paddled it toward the cave. He held a stick, with a dirty rag tied on it, which Harvey supposed to be intended for a flag of truce.

"They are coming toward us," said the young man, "and their errand seems to be a peaceable one. I suppose they want to speak to us."

"Talk to 'em, Mr. Dyce, and don't think of me. I don't want any thin' to say about the matter."

Harvey allowed the raft to come within easy hailing distance, and then ordered it to stop.

"Halt, or I will fire into you!" he exclaimed. "What do you want?"

"I want to make you an offer," said Big Sam, as his savage boatmen kept the raft stationary. "You see those two men of yours, over on that raft?"

There was no answer.

"Wal, you see 'em plain enough, and you know who they are, and what they are thar fur. I know that you don't belong to old Sile Bradley, but to another party, and I'm willin' to make you a good offer. Ef you'll give up that old cuss to us, with his gal and his plunder, the rest of you may go free, with all that belongs to you, and you may take those two men with you. Ef you don't do it, I will give those two men up to the Injuns, to be tortured and killed, and we won't show a bit of marcy to a mother's son of you when we root you out of your hole. We ken do that thing, easy, and I'm makin' you a mighty good offer. What do you say to it?"

"I say that you had better get away from here quicker than you came. If you come within range of my rifle again, I will put a bullet through you."

"Better think over it ag'in, young chap, fur we ken do all I say, and we will do it."

"Be off, or I will fire!"

With a curse and a threat, the ruffian spoke to his Indians, and they quickly paddled the little float back to the blockading raft.

"You mought hev saved yourself, young man," said Bradley, "but I s'pose you know your own business best."

"Even if I was mean enough to accept such an offer," answered Harvey, "you know as well as I do that the scoundrels would not keep their promise. I would as soon trust myself in the hug of a grizzly."

In a few minutes after Big Sam's return to the raft, he commenced to put in execution one of his threats. The prisoners were partly stripped, and were compelled to kneel, while two Indians, with tough twigs, lashed them on their

bare backs. The unfortunate pedagogue screamed and yelled at every blow that fell upon him, but Ben March bore the punishment so unflinchingly that his tormentors were unable to extract even a groan from him, and Harvey Dyce could hear him cursing and mocking them, as if the strokes were nothing but love taps.

"I reckon we can stop that thing, if we can't do any more," said the old man, while the tears stood in his eyes. "You take the red-skin on the left, and I will take the one on the right, and we will send 'em a warnin'."

Both seized their rifles, took a rest and a careful aim, and fired at the same instant. The Indian who was whipping Muggins leaped up, and fell as if he was shot dead, and the one at whom Dyce fired was evidently severely wounded. The "warning" was sufficient for them, and no more torture of the prisoners was attempted at that time.

A gloom settled down upon the occupants of the cave that night, a gloom that none of them seemed able to shake off. Molly Bradley wept while the shrieks of her old friend sounded across the water and penetrated the rude abode, for she did not need to be told that the prisoners were being tortured. Harvey Dyce was sad because she was sad, and because his friend, March, was in trouble. Silas Bradley seemed to be afflicted with an incurable despondency. The Delaware was silent as usual, and the Yankee was busy.

Thus the hours wore away slowly, untill the night was well advanced, and no further demonstration was made by the enemy. Dyce and Mollie were endeavoring to rouse the old man, and to devise some plan for the relief of their friends, when the reports of several guns were heard on the water.

"What's that, Life?" asked Harvey of the Yankee, who was watching at the mouth of the cave.

"Dunno. The folks on the raft are shootin', and there's somebody or something comin' this way. You'd better step here and look at it."

The young man quickly went to the opening, and glanced at the object that Stebbins pointed out. He at once saw that it was a man, swimming vigorously toward the cave.

"It is only one," said he. "Let him come."

The swimmer reached the entrance of the cave, and Harvey

recognized, to his great joy, the weather-beaten countenance of Ben March. He hastened to give his hand to the almost breathless man, and to assist him to rise.

"Thank God, that you have escaped!" he exclaimed. "Are you wounded, Ben?"

"I'm all right, my boy, I reckon, though I'm powerful tired," answered the hunter, as he wiped the blood from his face. "One of thar bullets has kinder grazed my head, but thar's no harm done, to speak of. So much cold water, or an empty stummick, ain't good fur me, but I wasn't goin' to stay thar to be whipped, you know."

Harvey led his friend into the cave, where he was warmly greeted, and made him sit by the fire, while Mollie hastened to bring him some rum.

CHAPTER XII

HOT WORK.

EVEN old Silas Bradley was startled out of his apathy by the appearance of Ben March, and he wrung the hand of the escaped hunter until the latter, with an oath, told him to desist.

"How did you git away, Ben?" he asked, when March was seated before some cold meat and some hot rum and sugar. "Whar is old Muggins? Why didn't he come with you?"

"You must be gittin' crazy, old man, to ask such a question," replied Ben. "Ef the cuss had had half sense, I mought hev tried to bring him off, though it was jest as much as I could do to git myself clear. Ef it hadn't been for him and his confounded crazy notions, the redskins wouldn't hev took us; but I ain't blamin' him fur that, 'cause it's his natur, and when he saw what he had done, he was powerful sorry, and took on so about it that I felt bad for him. After that whippin' we had, he kept up such a groanin' and bellerin', that he nigh sp'ilt my chances; but I got loose at last, and whispered

to him, to tell him what to do, when the crazy cuss commenced torkin' out loud and actin' so that I was sartin the Injuns would find out what was up. But they didn't, and I had to give him up as a bad job, or this child would have been thar yet."

"Haow did yew contrive to git loose?" asked the Yankee.

"I had been tied up jest that way afore, and was fixed for it. D'ye see this here little place in my sleeve, and do you see this little baby knife that I take out of it? That knife was giv' to me by a lady that I took across the plains once, and she made this place to keep it in. It ain't big enough to be noticed, the blade is sharp as a razor, so that I ken take it out and use it, even when my hands are tied behind my back. So, you see, I made out to cut the cords, and to git my hands loose. When I saw that I couldn't do nothin' with that school-teachin' chap, who hain't got as much sense as a suckin' baby, I rolled to the edge of the raft, and tumbled over. I reckon they must hev thort I was drowned, but I kep under as long as I could, swimmin' hard fur the shore. When I riz, they caught sight of me, and commenced firin', but I only staid up long enough to git a bit of breath, and dove ag'in, and so I got into this hole at last, but it was tough scratchin'. I reckon I mought hev got off the schoolmaster, ef he hadn't been so crazy, but he has got no more sense than a suckin' baby."

"That's jest the reason why he ought to be took keer of," said the old man. "Other folks ought to do for him what he can't do for himself. But I couldn't expect you to do it, Ben, and you did right to save yourself. I'm glad you've got off, Ben March," rising and wringing the hunter's hand again.

"Jest at this time I'm mighty glad you are here, to help take keer of my gal."

"Seems to me, ole beaver, that you look kinder queer to-night," said Ben.

"P'raps so; I don't feel adzactly right, somehow. Take keer of yourselves, boys; I'm goin' to look out at the lake."

So saying, the old man took his rifle and went to the mouth of the cave.

"Seems to me, Harvey, that Sile Bradley has got a queer streak in him," said Ben.

"Yes; he has been talking that way all day. I believe he has an idea that he is not to live long. I suppose you know that we are shut up here now, Ben; that we are closed in on both sides."

"I guessed as much. Reckon you have to keep a keeful watch now. I've a notion that the next move the red rascals make will be by water, but I don't think they will try anythin' to-night. I say, Sile, do they seem to be doin' anythin' on the lake?"

There was no answer.

"Sile Bradley! What's goin on outside?"

Still there was no answer, and Harvey Dyce, with an indefinable feeling of dread, rushed to the entrance.

"He is not here!" exclaimed the young man. "His rifle and his clothes are here, but he is gone."

Mollie Bradley raised her head with a blank and wondering look, and then sank on the stone floor, covering her face with her hands, while Ben March hastily joined Dyce at the mouth of the cave.

"Do you s'pose he ken hev drowned himself?" whispered Ben.

"No; I am sure that he has gone off to the raft to try to secure old Muggins."

"That's so, by thunder! The old man is as mad as the crazy schoolmaster himself. He will never come back from thar, but we can't do anythin', Harvey."

"No; let us watch and listen."

In a few minutes—and very long minutes they seemed—the listeners heard a noise and saw a commotion on the raft. There was a scuffle, followed by loud talking and cursing, and then the triumphant yells of the savages proclaimed that the unequal struggle was ended. Harvey carried the old man's clothes and his rifle into the cave, but Mollie did not need this evidence to assure her of what had happened.

"I know it," she moaned. "I heard the yell, and knew what it meant. Of course he would not be taken alive. I was sure that I should never see him again."

Harvey Dyce went to her, and took her hands in his.

"Your father expected this, Mollie," said he. "He told me that he would not live through this trouble, and he asked me

to promise that if any thing happened to him, and we should escape, I would take care of you and carry you to Missouri. I gladly promised, and I will keep my promise, like an honest man and a gentleman. You must not think that you are friendless, for we are all your friends, and I will defend you with my life, and cherish you as if you were my own—my own sister. Will you trust me?"

"I do trust you," answered Mollie, "and I thank God that he has sent me such a friend."

Her head leaned confidently on the young man's shoulder for a moment, and then she burst into tears, and he left her alone with her grief.

It was a sad and weary watch that the bereaved party kept during the rest of that night. Mollie Bradley sobbed herself to sleep, and the men, who were unusually silent, did nothing except stand guard at the two entrances, and try to get a little sleep, which they all needed, for they felt sure that they would have work enough during the day.

Early in the morning there was a stir among the savages, who had remained quiet after the death of Silas Bradley.

By the aid of Harvey Dyce's opera-glass, they could be seen busily engaged in cutting down trees on the larger island, and trimming off the trunks. The object of this labor was soon apparent; they were constructing another raft.

"That's a fire-raft they're makin' now," said March. "It's jest as I suspected; they're goin' to try to burn us out."

When the raft was completed, a large quantity of dry bush and boughs was placed upon it, making a pile that entirely covered it, and that was truly formidable in its proportions. The fire-raft was towed out to the blockading raft, in front of which it was placed, and the anchors of the latter were drawn up. There was a light breeze from the south, blowing toward the cliffs, and everything was favorable for the accomplishment of the diabolical purpose of the savages.

"Dew you calkilate they're goin' to try tew burn us aout, Mister?" asked the Yankee, who had been watching the proceedings with the others.

"That's thar idee, sure as shootin'."

"The old man said that the critturs would try sich a trick. He calkilated that they would jam a raft in among the rocks

here, and set fire to it, so's to scorch and smother us with the fire and smoke."

"That's what they mean to do, and I don't know how we ken hender 'em. The smoke will go out at that hole behind, I reckon, but it's got to pass through here fust, and it will draw in like almighty fury, with this breeze."

"Like a furnace with a chimbly to it, hay?"

"Adzackly so, and there seems to be no help for it. Ef the fire don't burn us, the smoke will snufflicate us. They've made a start, Harvey, and we must make up our minds to the wust."

"Let 'em come; we're ready for 'em," said the Yankee.

"What do you mean?" asked Harvey, with a look of wonder. "How are we ready for them?"

Stebbins went to a corner of the cave, and returned with three buckets, made of Dyce's india-rubber blanket, which he proudly exhibited to his companions. They were triangular in shape, the form being preserved and the angles strengthened by stiff pieces of wood, and nothing could have been better adapted for the purpose of dipping up water and throwing it.

"There are the articles," said the Yankee "paytented and mannyfactur'd by 'Liphalet Stebbins, this twenty-ninth day of August, one thousand eight hundred and fifty-one. There's only three of 'em, but that's enough for as many as can work. Here's plenty of water in the passage, and all we've got to do is to pitch it on the fire when the raft gits here. It will be hard work, I guess, but we are sure to win, with these paytent fire-buckets of mine."

Under the instructions of the Yankee, the men wet their clothes thoroughly in the water that flowed into the cave, prepared damp cloths to put over their faces, and placed their rifles where they could be snatched up in case of emergency. Stebbins directed Mollie Bradley, also, to cover her face with a wet cloth, in case the smoke should become oppressive within the cave.

Thus prepared, they awaited the approach of their enemies with composure, and with a good measure of hopefulness.

On came the fire-raft, sweeping down on them like doom, with the blockading raft just behind it, the Indians on the latter

being screened from view by their log bulwark and by the pile of combustibles. The mass of brush caught the wind, which acted on it as on a sail, gently and slowly impelling the two floats toward the cliffs, so that it was only necessary to use the sweeps a little in order to secure the right direction.

When it had come within a short distance of the cave, the fire raft was detached, and was suffered to move on by itself, while the other was kept stationary by means of its anchors. Three Indians remained in the incendiary float until they had set fire to the combustibles in several places, when they jumped off, and swam back to their comrades.

When the unwieldy mass reached the mouth of the cave, and jammed itself in between the rocks, the flames were under full headway, and the appearance of the blazing mass was truly appalling, while the roaring and crackling of the fire were more frightful than the yells of the half-frantic savages.

But the three brave men—Ben March, Harvey Dyce, and Life Stebbins—who were waiting for it at the entrance, felt no fear. They clenched their teeth, and grasped their buckets more firmly, resolved to conquer their enemy or to perish where they stood. As soon as the burning raft touched the rocks, they stepped forward, up to their waists in water, to meet it, and poured upon the flames and the yet unconsumed wood such a heavy and continuous stream that its effect soon became apparent; the flames were deadened, and clouds of steam mingled with the smoke that arose from the blazing pile.

It was hard work and hot work. Several times the men were compelled to plunge into the water, by turns, and to wet the cloths with which they covered their faces, in order to prevent themselves from being scorched. As it was, their hands were blistered, and the skin seemed ready to peel off, wherever it was exposed to the heat. The smoke and steam rushed in at the entrance in clouds, filled the cave, and sought an escape through the small outlet in the rear. The atmosphere was so close and stifling that the almost breathless firemen felt as if they would gladly give all they possessed for a draught of fresh air; but they did not quail, or relax their efforts in the least, for they were working for their own lives and for those of their friends.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE YANKEE'S TRAP.

WHEN the flames were so far checked as to be under control, Harvey Dyce, who had held the most exposed position, found himself too much exhausted to continue the labor, and called to Bighorn to come and take his place. The Delaware promptly obeyed, and Harvey returned to the interior of the cave.

As he staggered in, and tore the singed cloth from his smarting face, he heard a scream, and saw a sight that seemed to send all the blood in his body rushing to his heart.

Fallen on the stone floor at the end of the cave, was an Indian, who had just been struck down with a heavy stool, by Mollie Bradley. He was endeavoring to rise, and another was just coming through the narrow opening.

Harvey was unarmed, with the exception of his knife, and was very weak; but, without pausing to think, he rushed through the smoke and vapor, and closed with the savage who was descending the ladder. The Indian clinched him, and there was a brief struggle, which was ended by the fall of both, Harvey being underneath, for his strength had been completely exhausted by his previous exertions. He had, however, sufficient presence of mind and dexterity, as he went down, to hold his knife with the point up, so that his antagonist fell upon it, and received the full length of the blade in his breast.

With a great effort, the young man threw off his bloody burden, and rose to his feet. He had been nearly stunned by the shock of the fall; but was able to seize his pistol from the table, and to shoot down another savage who was endeavoring to effect an entrance. As he looked around, he saw that Mollie's assailant was lying on the floor, with the fragments of the broken stool by his head, but he saw nothing more, for his senses left him, and he fell down in a swoon.

When he opened his eyes, the brave girl was seated by his

side, bathing his head with water, and keeping guard over the entrance with his pistol, that lay within her reach. She had again struck down her foe as he attempted to rise, and had frantically repeated the blows, even after the savage had ceased to breathe. It is probable that she would have fainted when this excitement was over, had she not been anticipated by Harvey. When she saw him fall, her strength and presence of mind returned to her, and she at once went to his assistance. Discovering that he was not wounded, she knew that he must be in a swoon, and used such restoratives as were at hand. Cool water from the little stream, and a few drops of Silas Bradley's rum brought the young man to his senses, and a pretty strong dose of the stimulant enabled him to sit up and thank God that she was safe.

She had not omitted, while thus employed, to keep an eye on the entrance, holding Harvey's pistol in readiness to shoot down any intruder; but she was not troubled by another attack from that quarter.

By this time the fire on the raft had been almost entirely extinguished, although it still smoldered, and the clouds of smoke and steam that arose from it still filled the cave. The atmosphere, if the dense vapor could be so called, was so close and oppressive that it was exceedingly difficult and painful to breathe, and Harvey Dyce really felt a fear that they would be suffocated before it could clear up. Mollie Bradley, with her usual forethought, did not forget the men who were fighting the fire, and carried, as soon as possible, a cup of rum to each. This refreshment came in good time, especially to the Yankee, who was nearly asphyxiated, and who was obliged to suspend his exertions.

When the Indians on the blockading raft perceived that their antagonists were pouring water on the fire, with a fair prospect of subduing it, they gave vent to their rage and disappointment in horrid yells. Ben March tried to shout back a defiance, but he only succeeded in getting his throat full of smoke, and was obliged to let the red men have the howling all their own way.

When the flames were well got under, and it became evident that their incendiary purpose had not succeeded, they commenced to fire their guns at the mouth of the cave, in the

hope of hitting some of its defenders. The bullets rattled against the rocks, both outside and inside, coming unpleasantly near the poor fellows who were working with the buckets but fortunately no one was hit, and they continued the task more at their leisure, taking care to keep within the shelter of the jutting rocks. As soon as the fire was fairly extinguished, Ben March followed his companions into the cave, to rest and wait for the clearing up of the smoke, leaving the Delaware to attend to the smoldering remains of the raft, which then only needed an occasional bucket of water.

During the intervals of his labor, the Delaware turned his attention to Big Sam and the Indians on the blockading raft, who were still firing at the entrance of the cave. By a few well-directed shots, he compelled them to seek the shelter of their bulwark, and soon convinced them that they would consult their safety by putting a greater distance between themselves and the cliff, which they did, by returning to their former anchorage.

Bighorn reported the retreat of the enemy to his friends, who came to his assistance, and by their united efforts the mass of smoking timber was pushed off into the lake, and the mouth of the cave was once more clear. Then the fresh breeze that came sweeping over the water carried the smoke and steam out through the opening in the rear, and the occupants of the Hidden Home were again permitted to breathe freely. Eagerly and with thankfulness they drank in the refreshing air, which, although laden with the heat and vapors of the conflagration, was a great relief to their parched throats and overloaded lungs.

They were a strange and sorry sight, as they sat and laid down in the cave, and rested themselves after their arduous and exhausting labors. Their hair and beards were badly singed; their faces and hands were black and grimy with smoke and soot, and yet they hardly dared to wash them, for fear of rubbing off the skin with the dirt; their clothes were scorched where they had been exposed to the heat of the fire, and their eyes were swollen and bloodshot. Even Mollie Bradley's large blue orbs were red and inflamed, like the eyes of those "who tarry long at the winecup." Still, they showed a laudable determination to be jolly under difficulties, and

latched at each other's calamities, while they were sincerely thankful for their deliverance from a horrible death.

"We ain't any thin' like a handsome crowd, and that's sartin," said Ben March, as a comical grin overspread his sooty countenance. "Even Mollie, thar, has forgot how to look purty. Hows'ever, handsome is as handsome does, and I reckon we've done as well as men could do in our fix."

"I suppose, Ben, that that was what even you would call ~~hot~~ work," remarked Harvey Dyce.

"You're right thar, my boy. I won't adzactly say that I never ~~saw~~ any thin' hotter, but I'm willin' enough to admit that I never want to see the like of it ag'in. It was wuss than I had allowed it was goin' to be, fur the wind came in with ~~seen~~ a draught, that it would hev piled this hole full of fire and smoke, ef we hadn't been able to git the upper hand of it as we did."

"That is true, Ben, and we must thank Stebbins for saving our lives. We worked hard, but our labor would have been in vain, if he had not furnished the proper tools. He proved himself to be the right man in the right place, and it was truly fortunate for us that he was in our company."

"I shall never forgit him, Harvey, and I reckon none of us will ever forgit what we hev gone through this day. As it's all over now, we had better take a taste of those sperrets, and then think about gittin' suthin to eat."

Mollie Bradley, thoughtful and energetic as ever, had already kindled a fire, and Ben March quickly skinned a beaver, which was hung up to roast. The men then washed a portion of the black from their hands and faces, by dipping them repeatedly in the water, and carefully drying them, after which they put their weapons in order, paid another visit to the keg of rum, and were ready for the roasted meat, on whose savory smell they were already feasting in anticipation.

It was soon placed on the rough table, together with some fried flour cakes, and the smoky and grimy men attacked it as if they were half famished. When they had finished their meal, they declared that they felt like new men, if they did not look so, and smoked their pipes with the gratified air of those who have escaped a great peril and have had a good dinner.

They had already carried out the bodies of the savages who had been killed in the cave, and had thrown them into the lake, but traces of the bloody encounter still remained on the stones.

"You must hev had a tol'able tough kind of a skrimmage in here, while we wur workin' outside," said Ben March.

"It was close and exciting enough," answered Harvey "rather too much so to please me, and I hope we will not be troubled with such a struggle again, for it came near making an end of us."

"I'd jist like to know how it was," said the Yankee, "for I've got an idee, and am goin' to work on it arter a while."

"I suppose the Indians thought that we would be so bothered and confused by the fire and smoke at the mouth of the cave, that they would be able to surprise us if they made an attack in the rear, and I have no doubt that they would have succeeded in their purpose, had it not been for the bravery of Mollie Bradley. When I came in she had already struck down an Indian with a stool, and another was entering above. I killed him, and then I had time to get my pistol and shoot another who was trying to get in. I could not have helped Mollie, but the brave girl had done the work herself, and had finished her Indian while she had him down. If it had not been for her, we would not be living now."

"If I had only thought of it afore," said Stebbins, "and had had the stuff, I could have fixed up somethin', so that we might have laughed at 'em when they tried to git in that way."

"What do you mean?" asked Harvey.

"I mean that I've got a fust-rate idea, if I only had somethin' to work on. Darnation! I wish I had sich a piece of stuff as I want!"

The Yankee went to the entrance of the cave, and soon called out Dyce, to whom he showed a stout oak sapling, that was floating in the lake at a short distance from the shore.

"That's jist the very thing I want," said he. "If I only had that!"

"It is easy to get it," answered Harvey. "I will swim out for it."

But the Delaware was already divesting himself of his clothing, and the next moment he plunged into the water

with a rope, which he attached to the tree, and it was brought to the shore. It was then drawn up into the cave, where it was trimmed, and a length of about fifteen feet was cut off. The larger end of this, after considerable labor, was fixed quite firmly in the stone floor, and a stout lariat, or hide rope, was securely fastened to the other end. The Yankee then made a slip-noose in the rope, and by the united efforts of the four men the pole was bent down until it almost reached the opening in the rear of the cave. Here it was tied with another rope, which Stebbins made fast around a pointed stone, with a knot that was so arranged that the slightest touch would loosen it. He then disposed his slip-noose around the opening, so that it could not be seen from without, and placed within it a stout stick, connecting with the knot on the pointed rock. It was plain that a pressure on the stick would loosen the rope that held the pole, so that it would fly back to its original position.

"There's another paytent article," said the Yankee, regarding the machine with an air of satisfaction. "I guess we kin rest easy naow, withaout botherin' abaout that hole, for I calkilate you never seed a better Injun trap than that thing. But you must be keerful not to tech it or go near it."

"It's a trap I wouldn't be caught into," remarked Ben March, "fur all the beaver in Ameriky. It's comin' on night, boys, and we may as well try to git some sleep. Fur my part I'm too tired to stand up."

This proposition found general acceptance, and all laid down to rest, with the exception of the Delaware, who seemed able to live without sleep, and who remained on guard at the mouth of the cave.

The night was not far spent, when they were awakened by a horrid yell, and by a noise as if some heavy body was being whirled through the air and dashed forcibly against the rocky side of the cave.

Starting up, they threw some pieces of light wood on the smouldering embers of the fire to make a blaze, and saw the lifeless, mangled and palpitating body of an Indian, dangling by the rope from the still vibrating pole. He had been seized around the waist by the slipnoose, which was drawn up so tight that he seemed almost cut in two, and had been thrown

against the rock with such violence as to dash out his brains and to shatter all semblance of humanity out of his face.

"What's your notion abaout that machine?" asked the Yankee, as his friends assisted him to remove the body of the Indian.

"I think that your machine for destroying life is even ahead of your invention for saving it," answered Dyce.

"That will take a man whar he ain't jest as well as whar he is, and jerk the life out of him afore he knows what's the matter," said Ben March.

"For God's sake, take the man down. I am glad that I was not awake when he was caught," remarked Mollie.

"I wouldn't have calkilated on the machine having quite so much paower, but you see haow well it does its work," continued the Yankee. "Help me to tie it down agin, boys, and then you kin rest easy, for that thing will keep guard, and you needn't be afeard that it will be caught nappin'."

The trap was again set, and all except the Delaware again laid down to sleep, confident of the ability of the new sentinel to protect them in that quarter

CHAPTER XIV.

A FRIENDLY BULLET.

THE occupants of the hidden home awoke at an early hour in the morning, feeling refreshed and invigorated by their night's rest, and ready to meet the next hostile movement of their enemies, whatever shape it might assume. They made a hearty meal of cold meat and flour cakes, and relieved Bighorn of his watch. The Delaware ate sparingly of the provisions, wrapped himself in his blanket, and laid down in a corner to sleep. The others, who had partially cleaned the soot and grime from their faces, and who began to appear like white men again, looked around to see that they were in no immediate danger, and sat down to smoke their pipes in council, and to discuss the probabilities of another attack by

the Indians. The Delaware had reported that there had been no movement, as far as he could see, on the part of the Indians on the lake, but that the blockading raft had quietly remained in its old position during the night. There had been no more work for the Yankee's trap, as the savages, probably alarmed by the mysterious and frightful disappearance of their comrade, had made no further attempt to enter the cave at the rear.

"I reckon we mought as well let up on that trap till night sets in agin," said Ben March. "We kin take keer of ourselves well enough in the daytime, and some of us mought happen to come around the thing and spring it. Besides, I ain't ashamed to admit I'm something like Miss Mollie, fur I shouldn't like to see a human crittur when he was bein' smashed to pieces in that way, even though he war nothin' but a red-skin."

"I am of the same opinion," remarked Harvey. "If the trap should often work as it did last night, this hole of ours would soon look like a slaughter-house."

"I agree to that," chimed in the Yankee; "not that I feel skeary or nervous about it, for I should raally like to see it work; but the machine might lose some of its power by bein' kep' bent."

So the rope was loosened, the trap was carefully sprung, and the pole again stood erect and harmless.

Ben March and Harvey Dyce, leaving Stebbins to guard the rear entrance, went to the mouth of the cave to take an observation, and were astonished, as soon as they reached the air, to perceive the great change that had taken place in the atmosphere, in the sky, and in the surrounding country.

If the air had been smoky before, it could now be said to be loaded with smoke; oppressive before, it was now three times as dense and stifling. The sun, although nearly three hours high, and shining in an unclouded sky, was shorn of its beams, and looked like a coppery disk, as it appears when viewed through smoked glass. The western horizon was entirely obscured by the smoke that rolled up in thick masses, mingled with fiery tongues of flame, that shot up grandly every now and then, as if bolts of lightning struck through the dark clouds. The heat, also, had sensibly increased.

"The fire is comin' on us now, my boy, fur sartin," said Ben March, almost in a whisper, for he knew what the conflagrations of those regions really were, and respected them accordingly.

"Do you think it will pass over us, Ben? Do you think we have any thing to fear from it?" asked Harvey.

"It will go all around us, my boy, and that may as well be called passin' over us. It won't stop afore it reaches the mount'ins, and will go on then until it burns itself out. As fur the matter of danger, we couldn't be in a safer or better place than this, and we may be thankful that we are no wuss off. Ef the red-skins don't rout us out of here, we kin rest easy until the fire goes by."

"I heard you tell the old man, a while ago, that you thought the fire would be all around us before long, and that it might drive off the Indians."

"True enough, my boy, and I am still of that way of thinkin'. The red-skins will roost over on one of the ile-yands yonder, I reckon, when the fire gits too hot fur 'em, and they will be safe enough thar until it is over. Whether we kin git out and away through the little hole, when they are driv' off the land, and kin foller safely in the track of the fire, or whether they will be starved out by the lack of game when the fire has passed over, are onsartainties that I don't pretend to detarmine. One of those two things, hows'ever, is our on'y hope, fur it's sure as death that we will be starved ef they keep us blocked up in this hole much longer."

"We can only trust in Providence, Ben. We have beer preserved and well cared for thus far, better than we could possibly have expected, and we should not only be thankful, but should put our trust in the Power that has so mercifully protected us."

"Well said, Harvey. People who hev been through what we hev, and hev come through it safe and sound, would sca'ce be human critturs if they didn't look up above, and think they had somebody thar to depend onto. What's the matter with the Injuns, Harvey? 'Pears to me they are runnin' about mighty brisk all of a sudden."

Harvey Dyce looked through his glass, and easily perceived that there was quite a commotion among the savages, some

of whom seemed to be cutting wood on the island, and others were paddling a raft out to the blockading raft.

"What, in the name of wonder, are they trying to do now?" asked the young man. "Can it be possible that the schoolmaster has escaped from them?"

"No sech luck as that, my boy. He is too big a fool to run away ef he was ontied and the trail was showed him; and ef he did try it, he'd be sartin to run the wrong way. Let me take a squint through that spyglass."

As Bez looked, he saw that a stout post had been placed upright on the empty raft, and that the savages were busy bracing it up and fastening it to the logs. With an ejaculation that was partly a groan, and partly an oath, he returned the glass to Harvey.

"I know what they mean now," he sadly said. "It's the crazy old schoolmaster that they're fixin' up fur now, my boy, and they're goin' to make an end of him."

"What do you mean, Ben? Will they hang him?"

"Wuss'n that, Harvey Dyce; *they're goin' to burn him!*"

"God in heaven! Can it be possible? Are they really such fiends as to vent their spite on that unfortunate man, and to torture him so horribly?"

"It is even so, and they would do the same to you and me ef they had us thar. You can see it all plain enough now."

Plain enough indeed! Without the aid of his glass, the young man could see that the post was a stake, around which a quantity of brush and other wood was being piled, the purpose of which could not be doubted.

The victim was ready, and was soon brought forward to play his part in the fearful drama. Old Muggins, struggling shrieking, was carried from the blockading raft to the other, where he was stood up against the stake, and was held in that position until he was bound to it, the savages, in the mean time, yelling frantically, and dancing about like demons.

"Is it not possible," asked Harvey, "that the ropes may burn off when the fire touches them, and that he may thus have a chance for escape?"

"Thar's no sech hope as that, even ef he could swim. **which** the odds are he can't. It's not ropes they use fur that **kind of** work, my boy, but grape-vines and other green withes.

and the life will be out of a man long afore they are burned through."

"What a horrible death to die! How horrible even to think of it! They will murder him, in their devilish spite, before our eyes, and here we are, four strong men, and powerless to help him. Is there nothing that we can do, Ben?"

"Nothin' at all. We mought git ourselves killed, but that would do the poor chap no good, and would be the eternal ruination of pretty Miss Mollie, and we've got her to take keer of now."

"Every consideration must yield to her safety, of course. I will go to her, Ben, and will keep her within the cave, for it will never do to let her look on such a sight."

When the young man entered the cave, his mournful and serious countenance instantly told Mollie Bradley that he had bad news to communicate, and she looked at him inquiringly, but he remained silent.

"What is the matter?" she asked, eagerly and fearfully. "What is going on outside? Why have you stayed there so long?"

"Something is going to take place that you must not behold," he answered. "I am afraid, Mollie, that you will never see the old school-teacher again in this world."

"What do you mean? Have they murdered him?"

"Not yet; but they are making ready."

"Oh, I know it now! I know what you mean! Don't tell me any more! I have heard of such things, but never before felt what they really are. The poor, simple-hearted, good old man! To think that he should die, and such a death, and that nothing can be done to save him!"

"May God be with him, Mollie, for it is beyond our power to help him!"

The girl sat down upon a couch of skins, and burst into tears. Harvey Dyce, unwilling to intrude upon her grief, took a seat close to the rear entrance, and wished that one of the savages would come within range of his rifle.

Ben March, together with Eliphalet Stebbins and the Delaware, remained at the mouth of the cave, watching the proceedings of the savages, who were still busily engaged in completing their preparations for the murder of the unfortu

nate pedagogue. The victim's prayers for mercy and shrieks for help had now ceased. If he had not resigned himself to his fate, he had become convinced that it was inevitable, that it was not to be averted by any efforts that he could make. The Yankee, who was looking through Dyce's glass, informed his companions that the man appeared to be praying.

"I hope it will do him good," said Ben, "fur nothin' else ken. Ef God Almighty will make the fire kill him quick, it will be the greatest marcy that ken be shown him."

The savages piled more brush and wood about the stake, until it reached nearly up to the waist of their victim, whom they had not ceased to harass in the most cruel manner.

When all was ready, the float that bore the stake was placed in front of the blockading raft, and was pushed forward by it, until it was within plain view of those at the mouth of the cave, who could see through the glass, even the contortions of the poor man's face and the terrified expression of his countenance. It was then loosed from the raft, the brush was set on fire in several places, and it slowly drifted away, under the influence of a light breeze, that soon fanned the fire into a blaze. Then the savages set up a chorus of terrific yells and whoops, that shook even the stout hearts and hardened nerves of Ben March and the Delaware.

Their yells were echoed by the shrieks of the doomed pedagogue, who already felt the hot tongues of the flame as they licked his feet and legs, and who gave utterance to his agony in the most heart-rending screams. His friends in the cave, powerless to help him, could only clench their teeth, and mutter vows of vengeance, as they gazed at the horrible spectacle.

Mollie Bradley, hearing the cries of her old friend, was almost frantic with grief and terror, and endeavored to rush out of the cave, but was forcibly restrained by Harvey Dyce.

Still the float drifted slowly, the fire increased, the flames rose higher, and the yells of the savages and the shrieks of their victim were redoubled. The Delaware raised his rifle, rested it on a projecting point of rock, and took a long aim.

"What are yew goin' to dew?" asked Stebbins. "Yew can't hit any of 'em from here."

"Hit 'em good," muttered Bighorn as he fired.

The rifle cracked, the leaden messenger leaped forth from the deadly tube, and the shrieks of the schoolmaster were at an end, as his head fell forward on his breast. The bullet of the Delaware had found his heart, and his earthly troubles were over; he could be tortured no more.

The savages, seeing how they had been balked in their cruel pleasure, set up a yell of rage, and the burning raft, impelled by a current of air from the westward, drifted up the lake with the lifeless body of their victim.

"Good God! yew have shot him!" exclaimed Eliphalet.

"Better he die so," answered the Delaware, as he set down his rifle.

"Yes, it's a heap better so," said Ben March. "The Delaware' was mortal kind to send him that bullet. Ef I should ever be in his fix, I would thank any man to do me such a favor."

CHAPTER XV.

THE INFERNAL MACHINE.

BEN MARCH and the Yankee went back into the cave, looking mournful enough, and the former briefly explained how the tragedy had terminated, and how Muggins had met his death. Harvey Dyce drew a sigh of relief, and an expression of thankfulness mingled with Mollie Bradley's look of sorrow. She had known that her old teacher's death was inevitable, and was glad that he had been saved from further torture, although his death-shot came from his own friends.

"They shall pay for that!" angrily exclaimed Eliphalet Stebbins. "If I don't make them pay for that, may I never see New Hampshire ag'in!"

"What are you going to do now?" asked Harvey.

"I've got a good idee, and I guess I've got the stuff to work on, too. It won't be long afore you'll see haow I mean to fix 'em. I want that keg of rum, with the rum out of it."

"I hain't no objection to your takin' the keg," said Ben March, "but I would like to save the rum, if it ken be saved. It has done us good more'n once, and it may be useful agin'."

I don't want to put any thin' in Life's way, but ef the stuff ken be saved as easy as not, we mought as well keep it."

Mollie Bradley brought ont a couple of tin pails, that held the greater part of the liquor, the remainder was poured into a cup, for the immediate use of Ben March, and the keg was handed over to the inventive Yankee.

Having carefully taken out the head, he wiped the keg dry, and called for powder. It happened that Silas Bradley had had a good supply of the explosive material on hand, and when it was brought to Stebbins, he pronounced it more than sufficient for his purpose.

He then took a tin can, that had once contained preserved meats, cleaned it carefully, filled it with powder, and placed it inside of the keg. He filled the space around the can with sand and small stones, tightly packed in, and covered it with the same, using a tube that he had made to form a connection between the powder and the air. When this was done, he scratched his head and looked puzzled.

"Darnation take it!" he exclaimed. "I don't exactly see haow it's goin' to be done, but I've got the idee, and it's bound to come aout."

When the Delaware came in for his dinner, he glanced rather timidly at Mollie, but she went to him, took him by the hand, and thanked him for what he had done.

The Delaware was satisfied, as well as gratified, and Harvey Dyce would have been willing to affirm that he saw moisture in the eyes of the stoical red man.

He reported that there had been no noticeable movement on the lake, that the blockading raft remained in its old position, to which it had returned after the death of the schoolmaster, that the Indians appeared to be eating, and that the great conflagration was drawing nearer so rapidly, that it might be expected, at any moment, to show itself on the shores of the lake.

"I wish to thunder we could get at 'em now!" exclaimed Ben March. "I'd give my rifle fur the chance of anythin' like an even tussle with the cusses. They've got a heap of deer meat, I know, and will stuff themselves so full that they ken sca'cely move. Ef the Yankee has got any trick to play on 'em, he'll hev a fust-rate chance to try it."

The Yankee had a "trick," and was silently working to perfect it, with the assistance of Harvey Dyce. He had taken an old pistol that had belonged to Silas Bradley, and had fixed it in the keg so that, if discharged, it would instantly ignite the powder in the can. He fastened a wire to the trigger, and to the stopper of the keg, in such a manner that the trigger must inevitably be pulled if an effort should be made to draw the stopper. He also arranged some matches on the lower side of the head, in such a position that they would probably be ignited by a severe jar of the top of the keg. He then carefully and neatly replaced the head, after sprinkling another layer of powder over the sand, drew his wire as tight as he dared, and made it fast.

"The machine is finished, and I am satisfied that it will work," said he. "Of all the patents that I have got up yet, I guess that this here thing is the bustin'est. If it don't make a scatterin' among them red Injuns, provided they git hold of it, you may have Life Stebbins' head for a foot-ball. All I need now is a little rum, to pour on the top of the keg, and then I want somebody to take the machine, and set it in the water, so that it will float over to the raft. When the Injuns see it, I calkilate that they'll pick it up, thinkin' it's a keg of rum, and go to work to open it, abaout which time I guess somethin' will happen."

A portion of the rum, which was so strong that it could be smelt at a considerable distance, was poured on the keg, and Harvey Dyce volunteered to place it in the water; but the Delaware made the same offer, and Ben March judged that it would be best to entrust the Yankee's machine to him.

Carefully carrying the keg in his arms, and endeavoring to conceal the feelings of awe and reverence that he entertained for the mysterious invention, the Delaware placed it in the water, and swam with it up the lake, keeping close to the base of the cliff, showing only his head above the water, and taking pains to observe the direction and force of the current. When he judged that he had reached the proper place, he shoved off the keg, and returned to his companions, who eagerly watched the movements of their floating messenger.

All was quiet upon the lake. The Indians on the raft

were lying down, with the exception of Big Sam Hurst and another, who were standing up and making signals to their friends on the cliff.

The air was filled with smoke, which was rolling up in vast volumes, mingled with streaks of flame, from the forest at the western end of the lake, and there could be seen, on a nearer view, little lanes of fire running down to the shore.

Harvey Dyce, with his opera-glass to his eyes, watched the course of the keg, and reported his observations to his friends. On it went, bobbing up and down with the light waves that ruffled the lake, and moving steadily toward the hostile raft, as if to confirm the good judgment of the Delaware in selecting his point of departure.

"It is going right to the raft," said Harvey, as he kept track of the dark object with his glass. "Nothing could do better, and you deserve a medal, Bighorn, for starting it off as you did. Now it takes a turn, and I am afraid it is going away to the eastward. No; I must have been deceived by the motion of the waves, for it is moving straight on toward the raft. It is quite near to them now, and it is strange that they do not see it. Ah! they have found it! Big Sam is pointing at it, and the Indian makes as if he wanted to jump in and get it; but he is held back, and well he may be, for it is almost in their hands.

"They have got it now! It came alongside the raft, and they have lifted it up on the logs. They have smelt the rum, and two of the Indians are down on their knees by the side of the keg, lapping it up like dogs, but Big Sam drives them away. Oh! if the machine will but work, there's no telling what it may do."

"It will work, Mister," said Eliphalet, eagerly rubbing his hands. "You may jist bet your life that it will work, if they only try to open it, for I was tarnation mad when I made that machine. What are they doin' now?"

"The Indians are all awake, and are yelling and dancing around the cask. They have smelt the rum, and they want it opened right away. One of them goes up to it with a hatchet, to knock in the head, but Big Sam drives him away, and takes possession of it himself. He has his knife in his hand, and is digging at the stopper, while the red-skins are

nuddled around him. I am afraid it is a failure, Life. Why don't the thing go off, if it ever means to?"

The young man's question was answered, before the words were well out of his mouth, by a tremendous explosion, which seemed to shake the cliff itself. A cloud of smoke arose from the place where the raft had been, there was a great commotion of the water, and when the smoke lifted, nothing was to be seen but a few logs, scattered about the surface of the lake. The raft had been shattered into fragments, and all who were on it had been blown into eternity!

With feelings of astonishment and awe, the four men waited until they satisfied themselves that not a vestige remained of their enemies on the lake, and then went into the cave, where they communicated to Mollie the successful result of the experiment. She was naturally shocked, but could not forbear expressing a feeling of gratification, at the same time hoping that a way might have been opened for their escape. The Yankee was overwhelmed with praise and congratulations upon the success of his wonderful invention.

"The machine had rayther more power than I had calkulated on," he modestly replied. "I believe that that is ginerally a fault of my contrivances, and I hardly think I could git aout paytents for any thin' except the fire-buckets."

"All the machines were good, Life," said Ben March, "and I don't think we ought to complain of that 'un fur hevix' too much power, as thar was a heap needed. I reckon those red-skins will never try to burn another white man."

"Now that the lake is clear," suggested Harvey, "don't you think that we can leave this place? We have had so much trouble here, and have seen so much bloodshed, that it is unpleasant to remain. Besides, we have hardly provisions enough for another meal, and it will be necessary to search for something to eat. We can stay on one of the islands until the fire passes by, and surely we will find it easy to dodge the Indians while we keep the canoe."

"Jest my notion, my boy; but we've no call to be in a hurry about it, and it ain't long to night; so we'd better wait until it gits dark. I've an idea, as I've had all along, that the fire will drive off the red-skins on the land, and I reckon that we're able now to keep 'em away from the lakes; while we're

waitin', we may as well git together such things as Miss Mollie wants to take away, and eat up the rest of the grub, fur I'll be bound we'll be able to git plenty more afore mornin'. For my part, I'm keen fur a taste of that rum."

The rude table was set out for the last time, and the remnants of everything eatable in the cave were placed upon it and divided. The provisions soon disappeared, and then Harvey Dyce and Mollie Bradley, while the others smoked their pipes, proceeded to collect her father's property and put it in the dug-out. The most valuable articles were a pile of carefully cured furs, worth several hundred dollars, and a bag of gold and silver coin. In the bag were some papers, which Mollie requested the young man to keep for her, as she supposed that they related to her father's business in Missouri. He perceived that they were certificates of deposit, for a considerable amount, in a Westport bank.

After sunset, having heard nothing from the Indians on any quarter, Ben March concluded that it would be safe to set out, the canoe was launched, all got aboard, and it was pushed off into the lake.

The Delaware paddled the canoe along the edge of the cliff, until it was supposed to be safe from any Indians who might be lurking above, and then turned it out into the lake.

As Harvey Dyce looked up at the dark outlines of the hills, he called the attention of his companions to a sight that drew from each an exclamation of surprise, if not of terror.

CHAPTER XVI.

CAUGHT BY THE FIRE.

BIG SAM and Markelle had rejoiced greatly when Ben March and Muggins fell into their hands. The Frenchman was so much elated, that he came down to the lake, and was ferried over to the blockading raft, in order that he might exult over the captive hunter. They settled beforehand the punishment and tortures that they intended to inflict upon

him, for they well knew that the offer they made to Harvey Dyce would not be accepted, and had agreed that its refusal would afford them a good pretext for any cruelties that they might practice upon their prisoners.

The severe whipping that they caused to be inflicted upon the two men was but a foretaste of what they had in store for them, and was not at all satisfactory, for all their efforts had been able to extort nothing but jeers and curses from the stout-hearted hunter, and they despised Muggins too much to care whether he showed signs of suffering or not. The next morning, they determined, they would put Ben March to the severest possible tests, and they expected to derive great pleasure from his pain, for he was cordially hated by both.

It was easy, therefore, to imagine their rage and disappointment, when their principal captive escaped, from under their own eyes, and almost out of their own hands. When March had vainly endeavored, at the risk of his own safety, to assist the school-teacher to escape, he rolled over to the edge of the raft, and soon, as if by accident, fell into the lake. The alarm was instantly raised, and Big Sam and Markelle rushed to the place where he had disappeared.

The quick eyes of the Canadian saw a head start up out of the water, and he called attention to it, and fired at it. Several others fired at the same object; but Ben had dived again, like an otter, and he succeeded in reaching the shore in safety.

The two scoundrels were so enraged at this escape, that they resolved to vent their spite upon Muggins, but an incident occurred in the course of the night, that tended to mollify their anger.

The guard who had charge of the pedagogue heard a slight noise at the side of the raft, and saw a hand, grasping a knife raised above the logs, as if to cut the prisoner's bonds. He at once seized it, and gave the alarm. Markelle assisted in capturing the owner of the hand, and at once recognized him as Silas Bradley. When the old man was drawn up on the raft, he sprang to his feet, shaking off the grasp of the savages, and rushed upon the Frenchman. He was again seized, but Markelle was compelled, in self-defense, to use his own knife so effectually that he slew his antagonist.

Well satisfied with having gained such an easy victory over

his greatest enemy, the Frenchman concluded that he would give up the school-teacher to the Indians, to be dealt with as they pleased, and that he and Hirst would devote themselves to the more important business of conquering the foes that remained in the cave.

It was arranged that an attack should be made the next day, on the smoking-out principle that had been advocated by Markelle.

When the fire-raft had been constructed and loaded, and everything was in readiness, Markelle and Ara-po-wah were ferried to the shore, and went up on the cliff above the cave, for the purpose of participating in the attack if they could find an opportunity of so doing. Their only participation consisted in sending three men down the hole on the land side, who met their death at the hands of Mollie Bradley and Harvey Dyce. The struggle was a desperate one, as has been seen, and, if it had been followed up, it would probably have resulted in the capture or death of the defenders of the cave; but it was not followed up, for the chief was discouraged, and declared that no more of his men should be sacrificed. In the night, however, the Frenchman persuaded him to send down another, arguing that the inmates of the cave would probably be so exhausted by the labors of the day that they could think of nothing but sleep, and that it would be an easy matter to surprise them. But the Yankee's trap was on guard, and Ara-po-wah was so disgusted by the mysterious destruction it wrought that he refused to part with any more of his men, and sat on the cliff in gloomy silence, moodily revolving a mystery which he was unable to comprehend.

Big Sam and his allies on the raft were greatly surprised and disappointed at the failure of the fire-float. They then resolved to vent their spite on the half-crazed pedagogue. It was a sore blow to them when their "sport" was spoiled by the friendly bullet of the Delaware, which robbed them of their victim, but they found some consolation in gorging themselves with meat and lying down to sleep. They were in a fitting mood to appreciate a supply of "fire-water," and when the Yankee's cask was captured, and it was announced that it contained rum, they were instantly aroused from their lethargy, and clamored to have it broken open immediately. Big

Sam, who knew that the precious fluid would be spilled and wasted, protested against such a proceeding, and persuaded them to let him draw the stopper, so that they might drink in a reasonable manner. He attempted to do so, with what result has been seen.

During all this time the great conflagration was rapidly advancing, and had already made its appearance on the border of the lake. The party on the cliff had noted its swift approach, and had come to the conclusion that they must seek safety by fleeing to the mountains, or by joining their friends on the lake. The latter course appeared to be the easiest as well as the most pleasant, and they were signaling to their comrades, for the purpose of making known their intention and directing that a raft should be sent to the shore for them, when the cask was discovered and captured. In a few moments the explosion occurred, by which all on the lake were involved in a common destruction.

Ara-po-wah turned upon Markelle, and accused him of being the cause of all the calamities of the red men—of having led his warriors to that place in order that they might be slaughtered, and of being a rascal, a traitor, and a “bad medicine” generally. The Frenchman replied sharply, and the quarrel waxed furious, until near nightfall, when one of the Indians discovered and announced that they were cut off by the fire, and that escape was impossible.

It was even so, as they soon perceived, to their utter consternation. The fire, all unnoticed, had taken a turn to the northward, whence it had advanced upon the lake, and they were entirely surrounded by the flames, except on one side, and there lay a steep cliff and a deep lake. The despairing savages, feeling that their fate was inevitable, demanded a victim upon whom they could vent their wrath. It needed but a few words from Ara-po-wah to turn the storm against the white man, and they rushed upon Markelle, with the avowed intention of tearing him to pieces.

The wily Frenchman, who was also in a desperate mood, determined that he would not perish unavenged. He seized the chief in his sinewy arms, and the two men closed in a death struggle, from which the others were compelled to stand aloof.

CHAPTER XVII.

SAFETY—CONCLUSION.

SUCH was the scene that Harvey Dyce and his friends beheld, as they glided out on the lake, and looked up at their enemies on the cliff. Some of the savages were yelling frantically and vainly endeavoring to find an opening through the wall of flame that enveloped them on all sides but one; others were as vainly striving to take part in the single combat that was going on at the edge of the cliff; others, believing that a speedy death awaited them, were standing motionless, and chanting their own death-songs. All were too much occupied with their immediate interests to take any notice of the party that floated, quietly and safely, on the lake so far below them.

Ara-po-wah and the Frenchman, as has been said, had clinched in a death-struggle. Neither was able to use his knife, and their writhings, twistings and tumblings were such that the warriors were unable to render any assistance to their chief, and hardly ventured to oppose the fierce wrestlers.

For a moment the deadly foes, so lately friends and partners in villainy, stood upon their feet, almost breathless from their exertions, and then they recommenced the struggle, each striving to drag the other to the edge of the precipice, and to throw him off.

Both succeeded in their endeavors. They reached the frightful verge, tottered for a few seconds in each others arm and fell headlong, with a simultaneous cry that woke the echoes of the lake, right down into the dark and deep waters.

The warriors, seeing no way of escape, and pressed by the advancing flames, soon commenced to follow the example that had been set to them. One after another, chanting their death-songs to the last moment, and ending with a wild yell, they took the fatal leap, and were received into the placid bosom of the lake.

Mollie Bradley hid her face in her hands, and the canoe moved away from the scene.

It was possible, Harvey Dyce thought, that some of the wretches who had leaped down might have risen and saved themselves by clinging to the rock, but the dark water showed no sign of life. It was certain that Markelle and Ara-po-war had perished.

Tired and sick of such sights, the party in the canoe were paddled to the smaller island, where they landed and built a fire, satisfied and thankful that they were at last in no danger of being intruded upon by any human beings.

As Ben March had said, they found no difficulty in getting plenty to eat before morning, for the lake was so crowded with deer and other animals, fleeing from the flames that they were obliged to build large fires, and to keep guard with their weapons, in order to prevent them from taking possession of the island. They killed three fine bucks, which they brought on shore to be "jerked" for future use.

It was three days before they could leave the island, as the conflagration was still raging all around the lake, and as all felt that they needed a good rest before commencing their journey. They employed themselves, in the meantime, in preparing their meat, as they could not tell how far the fire had extended, and knew that they would not be able to find any game while they were compelled to travel in its track.

Having occasion to visit the cave, to bring away something that had been forgotten, Harvey Dyce went thither in the canoe, accompanied by Eliphalet Stebbins. In the Yankee's trap, which had been re-set when they took their leave of the "hidden home," they found the shattered and lifeless body of an Indian, hanging by one leg. He had probably endeavored to seek safety from the fire, and had met a death fully as horrible as that from which he had escaped. They cut down the body, and threw it into the lake, leaving the pole and rope to excite the wonder of any who should thereafter discover the cave. Of the other Indians they saw no sign, and were unable to tell whether or not any of them had escaped.

The body of the old trapper was not discovered, and was permitted to repose in the resting-place he himself would have chosen.

As soon as possible, Ben March visited the glen where the horses had been left, and found, to his joy and surprise, that

they were safe and sound. The fire had swept all around them, but had not touched the glen, and the animals, although they had doubtless been badly frightened, had been unable to escape, or to rush into destruction.

On the morning of the fourth day, the travelers, recruited in strength and spirits, set out on their journey toward a land of civilization. After a toilsome and tedious march, during which their horses suffered greatly for lack of forage, they reached Fort Bridger, where Harvey Dyce procured a wagon, and joined a train that was going to the east. As Ben March and the Delaware were unwilling to accompany him further, he gave them some suitable presents, and they went their way rejoicing, to resume their life of hardship and adventure.

In due course of time, Harvey and Mollie, accompanied by Eliphalet Stebbins, arrived at Westport, where Mollie was warmly welcomed by her relations and the friends of her mother. Harvey left her in the care of her friends, and went his way, promising to return and see her as he could.

The Yankee went back to New Hampshire, where he astonished the good people of his neighborhood by relating the exciting scenes that he had witnessed in the "hidden home," until he was ready to go by water to California, where he soon became a rich man.

Harvey Dyce, at Mollie's request, attended to the settlement of her father's estate, which consisted in Missouri land and money in a Westport bank. When this business was finished, he reminded her, as they sat by a cozy fire one winter evening, of the perils through which they had passed together, and of the solemn manner in which Silas Bradley had confided her to his care and protection. He asked her if she would be willing to pass through all the perils and pleasures of life with him, and to trust herself to him until they should be parted by death.

And she answered—Yes.

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